CREEPING JENNY

AND OTHER STORIES

By

KATE
DOUGLAS
WIGGIN

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AND OTHER NEW ENGLAND STORIES

RUFUS LIKED TO WATCH THE DIMPLE COME AND GO IN JENNY'S CHEEK.

CREEPING JENNY

And other New England Stories

BY

KATE DOUGLAS WIGGIN

WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY

HELEN MASON GROSE

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CREEPING JENNY

CREEPING JENNY

Jenny Lane lived in a shabby little farmhouse on the Back Nippin' Road that led from Riverboro to Moderation Village. The house was small and compact and as neat as wax inside, for there Jenny was Master of her fate and Captain of her soul.

Outside, alas, things were different. There was only the shell of a former stable; the shed was tumbling down, and, when rain descended in anything worse than gentle showers, Jenny's "indoors" looked like a syndicate of milk pans, the leaks were so many and the dripping of water so continuous.

It had been that way for three years, ever since the autumn that her mother had died; and her father, who had followed his wife in everything, followed her to the grave a month later.

His last words to his daughter had been: "I'm sorry to leave you alone, Jenny, but I'd feel better if only I'd left you shingled. Your mother and me was laying up and laying up ever since we got married. We bought the house and field, paid off the mortgage and gave you good schooling. We are furnished up as well as most o' the neighbors, but when your mother's health got slim and my strength begun to fail, we couldn't seem to get any farther than meat, drink, and clothes for the three of us. The buildings couldn't be kept up, that was the long and short of it."

"I know, I know, Father. Haven't I seen how hard you tried?"

"Now I'm on my death-bed," said the old man. "There's money enough in the bank to buy the shingles, but God knows whether you can afford to hire a man to put 'em on, labor's so scarce and so high."

"Don't worry, Father! I don't want your last days troubled with fears about

me and the roof. I'm twenty-two and I can earn my living somehow, somewhere!"

"'Tisn't so easy to earn your living and keep your buildings shingled too!" sighed her father.

"Maybe not, but I'll do it, in course of time!" said Jenny stoutly. "I've heard enough, all my life, about shingles; also about clapboards and paint. There isn't a young man in the neighborhood that I'd want to go to church with, but if one of them should ever chance to ask me to have him, I'd say: 'Shingle the house and I'll say yes!' "

The girl's father smiled in spite of his pain as he whispered: "Don't be too easy when it comes to bargaining, Jenny! Stiperlate first quality cedar shingles, him to buy 'em as well as put 'em on! You're worth it!"

"I shall never have a chance to 'stiperlate,'" thought Jenny, as she went to the kitchen to make gruel; and, as a matter of

fact, although Jenny was good to look upon, and had an acre of timber land that would bring in something, fifteen years later, no lovelorn swain had offered to take her and her leaky house for better, for worse.

Later on there were other reasons why Jenny had no opportunity to "stiperlate." The anxious and dreary months went on relentlessly after her father's death, when new misfortunes descended upon her — an accident — unskillful treatment, too long delayed — finally, the loss of a foot — a crutch — eternal lameness. No wonder, as she dragged herself about the house and little garden before she had had time to accustom herself to her infirmity, that Riverboro sympathetically called her "Creeping Jenny." Her nearest neighbor, Mrs. Day, a widow, lived within easy walking distance (it seemed longer when you limped!), and the village itself was only a quarter of a mile away, so she did not lack an occasional call, the offer of an errand or

message, and often a drive to church, made wretched by the difficulty of mounting and descending the wagon, with the added mortification of limping into a rear pew.

Still she kept things together, sewing, crocheting, knitting, sending braided and drawn-in rugs to Boston, selling the butter from the one cow's milk and the hay from her eight-acre field.

She got "Pollyanna" from the village library and read it faithfully, but she was rebellious and it did her no good. She allowed to herself grudgingly that if she had lost a hand instead of a foot she couldn't have earned her living; but she never got to the point of being grateful that it was a foot, not a hand; she was unregenerate and wanted both.

It was late November now, and even at the end of the month there was a hint of Indian summer in the air, though a soft rain had been falling for many hours. Jenny's side-door stood open; there was a pale

flicker of sun now and then and she was in the pantry wondering if she could venture to take away some of the milk pans that dotted the kitchen floor, all of them a third full of drippings from the ceiling.

She heard the swinging of the garden gate and a knock made her take her crutch and limp to the kitchen door.

A good-looking young man, fairly well clad, with his left sleeve hanging in a strange sort of stiffness, raised a shabby felt hat with his right hand and asked:

"Is this Miss Jenny Lane?"

"Yes, sir."

"They told me at the station you were minus a man and might have a few days' work for me."

"Everybody in Riverboro is minus a man, and everybody needs a little help. There's plenty to do here, for I live alone, but I have little money to spend on keeping up the place."

The young man glanced in at the door

with a boyish sort of informality and asked: "Do you keep a dairy farm?"

Jenny laughed outright, and kept on laughing as she answered: "No wonder you asked, but I shouldn't set milk on the floor and it's water in the pans. It's a water farm!"

The laughter was mutual now, and the audacious youth, moving to the lower step and glancing upward, said: "I see you're a little shy on shingles?"

"Just a trifle, but I'm long on milk pans!"

"They told me you were a first-class farmer but — er — a little handicapped on outside work."

Jenny leaned against the door-frame and stroked her crutch with a smile.

"Footicapped would be a better word," she said. "Are you a stranger in Riverboro? Won't you rest a moment? Make your way through the milk pans to the rocking chair. I do need a little help in getting my winter wood in."

"You'll require a lot of wood unless you get a tight roof over your head," said the stranger. "I'm a Western farmer's son, or at least I was; but my mother and father died while I was in France and I'm alone in the world."

"France?" echoed Jenny, with a new glance in her eye and a new tone in her voice.

"Yes, but we'll cut that out! I landed in Boston the other day and now I'm just kind of 'adventuring' till I get my 'peace legs' on."

"You couldn't have come to a worse place than Riverboro. There hasn't been an adventure here in a hundred years."

"I don't know about that! I've only been in town half an hour and I've seen a water farm and a lady that runs it to the Queen's taste!"

Jenny laughed again; the sweetest, most tuneful laugh in the world; one that she seldom used nowadays but had kept over from her long-ago youth. What a droll

stranger! And how much more interesting he would be in the intervals of sawing and splitting wood, than old George Gibson.

"It is too ridiculous that you should have seen the milk pans and noticed the shingles. I am going to have the roof fixed next spring if I live. Father saved up money for the stock but — but, I had to use it in a long illness."

"Yes, yes!" interrupted the stranger. "It beats all how that runs through life! You save up money for shingles and then you can't get enough more to put 'em on."

"I'm nearly ready for the second time," Jenny's tone was cheerful and incisive, "but I don't think I have quite enough to pay for labor. Besides, you couldn't, I mean you wouldn't — shingle — could you?"

"Sure I would, and could! You're strong on the subjunctive, aren't you? You've noticed I'm handicapped (I don't have to invent a word, it's all right for my case!). But just you wait and see what I can do

with the substitute presented me by the U.S.A.! I'm going to have something more stylish later on, but I don't believe it will serve me any better; you see it's only my left arm!"

Jenny stopped her ears.

"Don't tell me you've read 'Pollyanna' and are glad it isn't your right arm!"

"Sure I'm glad! Who wouldn't be? Who's Pollyanna?"

"She's a girl in a book who's always glad that things aren't any worse."

"All right for Polly! More power to her elbow! Now I'm by no means dead broke and I've got back-pay coming to me from Washington, when they get 'round to it. But I want to train myself to work at anything that comes. If I can't make good I'll go to a vocational school, but I want to harden myself first."

"My roof in November would be a good place for that!" said Jenny contemplatively. "What wages do you ask?"

"Half what the other men get around here, because I'm not a skilled worker at present. Now if you've got a ladder on the premises I can get up and tear off the old shingles while you negotiate for the new ones. Going to buy first quality cedars?"

Jenny grew red and then white, for her memory flashed back, and by an odd trick she remembered her father's injunction to "stiperlate," a word that was to be used in far more romantic circumstances.

"Can't manage first quality; seconds will have to do," she said, with some embarrassment.

"O.K. I've had nothing but 'seconds' all my life. Sometimes I wonder I didn't have a second wife."

"Why didn't you?" The question suddenly popped out of Jenny's mouth without any warning.

"Because I never had a first! Ha! ha!" (He certainly was the most unusual young man she had ever met and the most informal

on the occasion of a first call. She felt as if she'd been to high-school and singing-school and dancing-school with him!)

The stranger rose from his chair. "I'll 'lime' the 'seconds' for you myself to save expense. Want me to get them for you, because I know a shingle when I see it and maybe you don't? I'll go in to the village, get a boarding-place, and come back after lunch for a half-day's work."

"Thank you — that will be very kind."

"I'll pick up the milk pans and empty 'em for you, first. Poor old things! They don't know they're going out of business! Let me look at your ladder, please. A man that works with a woman's farming implements ought to carry a big life insurance!"

Jenny laughed again, joyously. Then, entirely forgetting decorum, she wiped her eyes with her apron and said, "If I only knew what your wages were going to be I'd raise them, you are so funny! The ladder is in the shed. I think it's all right."

He looked about the shed in amazement at its cleanliness and order. "Holy Moses!" he thought, "does that little creature sweep and scrub this place and pile up this wood and kindling, skipping about on a crutch? And us great husky lubbers getting 'orders of merit' for doing our duty by the country. Wonder if Miss Jenny Lane has had any medals handed out to her? She can have mine when I get well enough acquainted to give it to her."

Jenny followed him out to the shed.

"Is the ladder quite safe?" she asked.

"Safe as a meeting-house."

"Then, as you go to the village, you'll see twin boys hanging over the gate at the next house, Mrs. Day's. Ask the red-haired, freckled one (his name is Alfinso) if he'll come up this afternoon and help you, for five cents. He'll hold the ladder, pick up the shingles or commit any crime if you just tell him that Jenny'll have fresh doughnuts for you and him at supper-time. Don't ask

Alfonso, the dark-haired twin; he doesn't like work and doesn't like doughnuts."

"Well," said the stranger, wiping his hand on a potato sack, "I wasn't in the Salvation Army belt when they were distributing doughnuts to the boys and my mouth is fairly watering for one. My name's Rufus Holt, of Lawrence, Kansas." Here he held out his hand which Jenny took, stunned by the suddenness of his action. "I'm your hired man till this roof is fixed. You look to me like a grand little boss. I'll be back in an hour and I hope I don't get Alfinso and Alfonso mixed!"

"Creeping Jenny" has a method all its own of making its way upward and onward, silently, smoothly, under and over, betwixt and between obstacles. The slender little green vine climbs, not so much with strength, as with swiftness and grace, and accomplishes its growth in a miraculously short space of time. You can leave your

garden rake against the barn door some warm night, and next morning Jenny will have crept up to the top of the handle, leaned over and flung down a few little fragrant blossoms here and there just to give you a hint of Nature's magic.

By a like process and another sort of magic, Jenny Lane crept into Rufus Holt's heart, which was a big lonesome one, howling with emptiness, at the time he began shingling her house. They came to know more of each other as the days went by. He and she, with Alfinso, ate luncheon together on the shed bench so that the day's labor need not be delayed by a trip to the village for Rufus. (At least that is what he said, and she said, and Alfinso said, and Mrs. Day said, and nobody doubted it but the postmistress.)

Alfinso, whose pay had now been increased to ten cents a day, was the most faithful of "gooseberries," but even he sometimes wandered away to the wood-pile to work on a motor that he was constructing, to be

used in connection with the power of an old alarm clock.

At such times Rufus and Jenny would talk together before she gathered up the dishes. She allowed him a pipe, and when she attempted to rise and go to the kitchen he would say: "Take your 'nooning,' Miss Jenny, same as the rest of us. The minute you drop your housework you take out your needle."

"I've had to be busy to keep from thinking, these last two years," she said, quietly arranging the knives and forks for clearing away. "Now I'm afraid of getting idle, for what with company at lunch, the sound of hammer or saw all day, and the smell of paint all night, it seems as if Boston couldn't be any gayer than my little house."

Rufus liked to watch the dimple come and go in Jenny's cheek, a dimple that had enjoyed little use till lately; he also admired the whiteness of the neck that rose out of the blue gingham working dress, and the

long eyelashes that too often lay on her cheek and hid her brown eyes. He often tried to say something that would bring a quick upward glance full of fun or understanding. As for his talk, no words can tell what it was to the girl who had spent hundreds of long, silent, lonely days, feeling her youth slipping by, a tragedy without a single witness.

"Where were you last Christmas, Miss Jenny Wren?" Rufus asked between pipe-puffs, after lunching gloriously on shoulder-of-mutton stew. (He had always called her Miss Jenny Wren after the first week.)

"Here, of course!" she said, smiling. "I was born here, lived here and probably shall die here. All the rooms but the kitchen had icicles hanging from the ceilings and window-frames. The parlor looked like that famous cave in Kentucky with the stalactites in the roof. There had been a blizzard on the twenty-third and I couldn't go to the church Christmas tree. It was nearly as bad the

Christmas before. I've never celebrated Christmas day, except to plant a little hemlock twig in a flower pot and hang Mother's and Father's pictures on it."

"Jehosaphat!" ejaculated Rufus. "It wasn't so bad as that in the trenches where I was. Plenty of company — of one sort and another; I declare women always have the hardest of it in this old world somehow. Trenches and over-the-tops were exciting compared to what you've gone through. They were *life!* A man generally has life and adventure with his hard knocks; but women are always saving, scrimping, doing without, suffering, nursing, burying, paying other people's debts and bearing other people's burdens. Rotten luck, being a woman!" and he knocked the ashes from his pipe furiously.

"I never thought of it that way," said Jenny serenely. "I have my one burden, but it's my own, nobody else's!"

"Say, if I'm hereabouts to help, suppose

you give a kind of a housewarming this year; some sort of a make-shift Christmas and show off the shingles! Hey?"

"Who would come?" cried Jenny. "And how could I compete with the church Christmas? Besides you are going to Boston."

"I haven't decided about Boston yet." (Jenny's heart leaped into her mouth and stopped her breath.) "As for the company, Mrs. Day could come, Alfinso and Alfonso (hateful little beggar, Alfonso!), Mrs. Strout, who boards me; and there's the station master that advised me to come to you for a job, and the man I bought the shingles of, and the storekeeper we owe for nails — that's quite a good crowd! You put in a few lady friends and I believe we could frame up a party that would make Boston look dull. What's the matter with the parson? Why couldn't he come? You're in his parish, aren't you?"

Jenny swayed to and fro with mirth.

The point of view was so fresh, so young, so unlike Riverboro. "You don't know how funny you are!" she exclaimed. "The minister calls twice a year, but always in summer."

"Tell him to make it once and come Christmas Eve!" said Rufus, imperturbably. "Tell him your leaks are stopped and you'll show him a wounded soldier who did the shingling. 'Feature' me, don't you know? Tell him you'll have my Medal of Honor on the marble-top table."

"You've never shown it to me," said Jenny, softly.

"It's in Boston with my best clothes. Besides I've told you all about it. There happened to be a lot of fellows about when I was up against a hard job and they told on me. The boys didn't all have that luck or the U.S.A. couldn't have turned out medals enough to go around. . . . Now it's time to work again. You think about that Christmas party before I buy my ticket to Boston.

I'm going to patch up that bad place by the chimney," and Rufus went out the shed door and mounted the ladder.

Oh! the terrors of that high ladder and that sloping roof to Jenny, from the very beginning! With a white, knit cape over her shoulders and a white scarf tied round her head, she used to limp to some unseen point of vantage and watch Rufus with her heart in her mouth, lest he should slip and lose his hold. Sometimes he would catch her at her post, and looking down, think that her face looked like a love-apple, all pinky red and creamy white. And the warm glow of having some one down below caring a little whether he slipped — he, Rufus Holt, a down-and-outer!

He never did make a misstep, for he was a very demon of ingenuity and skill in using his one arm.

"Brave, clever, good, big-hearted!" sang Jenny's heart from the ground.

"Plucky, cheery, sweet and sound!" sang

the heart of Rufus from the roof — but neither of them said anything in words.

Mrs. Day said considerable, but she liked Jenny Lane and stood up for her when the postmistress said there was more in that shingling business than met the eye.

"I don't see anything wrong in it," Mrs. Day maintained stoutly. "Jenny's roof would have fallen in on her if she hadn't shingled this fall. It looks like Providence to me."

"He's so slow at it that it looks like courting to me," observed the postmistress while scanning the morning's postcards to see if anything interesting was likely to happen in the neighborhood.

"Alfinso thinks the world of Mr. Holt, and he's getting ten cents a day now. It's true Alfonso takes three of it away from him every night. He says five is due to him because he's a twin, but he only takes three cents because he don't do any work."

"Alfonso's goin' to make a good business

man when he grows up," said the post-mistress.

It was half-past four in the afternoon, but in the short December days it was nearly as dark as midnight.

A cheerful fire snapped in Jenny's highly polished kitchen stove. The yellow-painted floor with its braided rugs reflected the light of the kerosene lamp, the cat was asleep in the rocking-chair with the cretonne cushion, and Jenny sat by the table making out a crochet pattern from a magazine in front of her. She had changed into her afternoon dress of brown cashmere with pongee collar and cuffs and apron, so that she looked more than ever like Jenny Wren, Rufus Holt thought, as he came in from the tool-house with a lantern.

"Alfinso is splitting and piling his kindling," he said. "He wants me to wait and go along home with him. Alfonso has told him there's a ghost between here and the

corner. Gracious! Can any parlor in the world beat a kitchen for comfort when it's rigged out and kept like yours! (No, puss, I wouldn't have you move for the world, even if you offered to! I'll take a wooden chair!)"

"The cat is spoiled," said Jenny, "and you look tired. You ought not to be doing rough work or you won't get to be yourself again."

"I'm myself, right enough; in fact I never was so much myself since I was born. I'm not tired; the sight of you and this kitchen rests me clean through to the bone."

Jenny changed color, but studied the crochet pattern with renewed care.

"I don't miss my arm any more," Rufus continued, playing with her thread. "I've learned to do without it. I never thought I should, but I have, with a little help from a lady friend. I never was bitter about it like some. When you come to think of it, Miss Jenny Wren, it's wonderful how Almighty

God has given us two of a kind in most things — on the *out*side, anyway. As to the inside furniture, the doctors have shown us how to get along without most of that. If we'd been started out with one eye, one ear, one arm and one leg, where would we have been nowadays?"

"We've only one nose and one mouth," objected Jenny.

"And how would we have looked with two?" laughed Rufus. "But that's not to the point. The house is finished, Jenny Wren, and what would you think of buying a few second-hand boards and letting me make the cow-shed more comfortable for winter?"

This moment had to come. Jenny had been dreading it for days. There was a pause, then: "I'm going to sell the cow," she stammered.

Rufus looked surprised. "Are you troubled about the price of feed, or afraid the winter work will be too much for you?

That's why I'd like to make a better place for her and patch up the piece of shed you have to walk through to get to her — after I leave. It's a wonderful season but it's the eighteenth of December and snow must be coming along soon."

There was another moment of silence, then Jenny spoke recklessly. "You see, Mr. Holt, we've gone on from one thing to another for three weeks, because the leaky roof ruined the house in so many ways, and there's never been a man to help, since father died. We've patched the flooring, put in new door-sills and weather-strips on the windows, papered the sitting-room and plastered the kitchen ceiling — and all the time I've known I was going too far. I paid you fifteen dollars the first week, but it wasn't half what you earned and you gave me back three for lunches. Then you wouldn't take the last two weeks' wages because I was buying bricks and lumber and you said we could settle up when the

work was finished. . . . I can't let it run on, Mr. Holt, I can't! I'm not in want; I've something in the bank and my hayfield more than pays for my winter fuel; but I have to be careful, and the house is so nice and cozy now it would be self-indulgent to do more. I'd better sell the cow. You're as kind and generous as you can be, but you are a stranger after all, and I have no claim on you."

Rufus gave her a long, searching look.

"You honestly feel I'm a stranger, do you?"

"Well, I — I don't exactly *feel* that you are, I only *know* it. My mind tells me so."

"It's funny!" said Rufus. "Now — I feel like a partner, not a stranger."

Jenny clutched at the saving word. "You have been the best of partners," she acknowledged, straightforwardly.

"Oh, no! Not the best! I'm capable of being a heap better partner than I have been. Now stop crocheting, listen to me,

and don't speak till I get through. . . . In the first place, do you like me?"

Jenny flared at this.

"Why do you ask a question like that? You know that nobody could help liking you! You know you're as sunshiny and thoughtful as you can be, and as for being interesting and funny and unlike anybody else in the world, you know well enough you're that; so why do you ask such foolish questions only to hear yourself praised?"

Rufus made a sudden movement and then subsided again into his chair.

"That's satisfactory, so far as it goes," he said calmly, "though it doesn't go far enough to suit me. There are things I've got to say to you, and when they're over, we need never speak of them again. I haven't any home, nor any people but a married brother in Kansas, whose wife and four children I've never seen. He always worked the farm and it fell to him, as was right. I got a little money from my father,

earned more at my trade in Chicago and saved it. Then I went across with the other boys. You don't really know anything about me except what I tell you, but I've got a clean record to show the neighbors, and I swear to God there's nothing wrong with me except that I've got one arm instead of two. When I came down this road from the station three weeks ago I took a good look at you, skimming around with your crutch, and swinging your right foot off the ground."

"Don't!" cried Jenny, covering her eyes.

Rufus put his big hand over her little ones and wiped the tears away with her crochet work. "I've got to show how I feel about you, and then I'll ask what you think of me," he explained. "I said to myself that day: 'Here's a chance to help somebody that's had to bear what I have.' They told me at the station you needed some work done, so I just plunged in, made good, and got the job. But I had no idea of falling in love with you, Jenny; that's your fault, not

mine. I want to marry you, but I don't know how you feel about it."

"I don't want to be pitied and married just to be helped," said Jenny stubbornly. "After my accident I just made up my mind I would never marry."

"Why?" asked Rufus.

"You know why," Jenny answered.

"Then the reason you don't want to marry me shows me that I had no right to ask *you*, isn't that so?"

"No, it isn't; it's different with a woman. Besides, I do want to marry you, but I won't."

Rufus moved a little nearer. "Jenny, we've each got a minus sign against us — there's no getting over that; but Holy Moses! you're hung all over so thick with plus signs that your minus doesn't show up at all! Your face, your eyes, your hair, your voice, your disposition, your spunk, your common sense — all plus! The trouble is with *me*. There would be times when a

girl might blush if she had a one-armed husband!"

"Blush? If she did she ought to be struck by lightning!" — and Jenny's eyes flashed.

Rufus caught her hands. "Jenny, Jenny, be true with me, speak straight out! Do I seem a little short of a full man? How do you see me in your secret heart?"

Jenny rose to her feet under a kind of spell that made him rise to meet her. She leaned against him and said: "I see you whole, and strong and precious and splendid, Rufus!"

Rufus held her close, drying his secret tears on her hair.

"Oh, you little brick!" he whispered. "You darling, winsome little brick! Would you mind kissing me?"

"Not in the least!" she answered, and was proceeding to do it with all her heart when Alfinso entered with a huge armful of kindling, which he dropped into the woodbox with such force that the house shook.

"Alfinso, you dropped something. I heard you distinctly." Rufus was cool and collected as he put Jenny back in her chair. "Now I've some news for you. Jenny and I are going to be married on Christmas Eve and your family is invited. Will you take care of the house while I go to Boston and get all my papers and passports and identifications and finger-prints and certificates and army records and honorable discharges and pedigrees, and draw my back pay — because I am a stranger in Riverboro and I want to get into society. Why don't you speak? Aren't you surprised?"

"I would 'a' been," said the boy, "'cept that Alfonso and the postmistress both said it would turn out that way; but Mother stood up for Jenny; she said it wouldn't."

"That's what all the women will have said," laughed Rufus.

"Well, all the men will say I jumped at you, so accounts will be square!" and Jenny smiled triumphantly back at Rufus, all

blushes and confusion, her heart beating like a wild bird in her breast. "Go, Rufus, please," she said in a low tone, "and take Alfinso. I want to be alone with myself and get used to — happiness."

He bent over her and kissed her cheek while Alfinso went for his muffler and mittens.

"Good-by! I'll bring back the ring; don't forget the party. We won't stint refreshments. I'll give the twins a dollar to bring you little trees and evergreens for garlands and we'll make a brave showing of the house. Isn't it lucky there'll be a full moon on the shingles? No doubt about the minister now! He'll have to come in the performance of his duty. Oh! my dear, my dear, God is being very good to me!"

"Good to *us*," whispered Creeping Jenny, putting her lips softly and shyly against his sleeve.

THE AUTHOR'S READING AT BIXBY CENTRE

THE AUTHOR'S READING AT BIXBY CENTRE

[*Those readers who are familiar with "Timothy's Quest" will remember, perhaps, that Aunt Hitty Tarbox is a village seamstress and dressmaker who goes out by the day in Pleasant River and Edgewood, her specialty being the making-over of boys' clothes. Perhaps they will recall, too, that she uses her needle, her scissors, and her tongue with equal rapidity, and that each one of them is about as sharp as the other, although she is a member of the Orthodox church in good and regular standing. After thirty years' life in Pleasant River, that quiet village has proved too small for her genius, and she has removed to the more thriving town of Bixby Centre, an imaginary place located anywhere in the State of Maine. Mrs. Strout, an old friend from Milliken's Mills, has come to visit Bixby for a day or two; and it is during a call upon Aunt Hitty that she gains a general idea of the Author's Reading which has just occurred. Imagine Aunt Hitty, then, in a comfortable sewing-chair, her lapboard on her knee, workbasket within reach, tongue in excellent running order, and one eye always on the road which goes past her window — for she is one of the few persons who can make over boys' clothes, conduct a fire of conversation, and miss nothing that goes on in the outside world, all at once.*]

MONOLOGUE: Mrs. Silas Tarbox, otherwise Aunt Hitty, speaking:

"Step right in, Mis' Strout. I should 'a' come over to see you before this, but I can't stir from my chair to-day, my foot's so lame. I'm glad you brought your fancy-work, for I'm so behindhand with my sewin' I don't dass to lay down my needle. We've had the busiest week of the whole summer, and Si not bein' through with his hayin' we had to keep right along with it, entertainment or no entertainment, so I had work inside as well as outside the house.

"Oh, yes, the Readin' was a great success, as everything is in Bixby Centre, when we get round to it; but it made lots o' work, I can tell you. It's kind o' queer you don't have none o' these things over to Milliken's Mills — but there! there ain't many small places that's got the talent we have here to the Centre, and talent allers attracts talent, somehow. Si 'n' I lived for thirty years in Pleasant River, and we know well enough

what a dull place that was. They couldn't even get up a funeral there, without I planned it and managed it.

"No, the entertainment wa'n't for the church; it was for the benefit of the Winter Night Reading Club, but, of course, we had to give it in one of the three meetin'-houses, for we ain't got any hall. Oh, yes, I'm a member of the club, an' I was real pleased when they asked me to join it, for though I never was a great hand at readin' to myself I like to git into a rockin'-chair and hear other folks read out loud.

"Is there enough people in Bixby to fill three meetings? Why, no, there ain't; but nobody expects to see a church filled nowadays. Money? Of course there ain't enough to support three societies, but land! a church has something else to think about except being supported, I guess! For that matter, there ain't always enough Democrats to elect a President, but they go right on being Democrats whether they git anything or

not. They git the fun o' bein' Democrats, 't any rate, if there's any fun in it, or Baptists or Universalists, or whatever 'tis!

"When we come to decidin' which church we should have the Readin' in, there was consid'able talk, and finally we settled it by writin' to the author and askin' her if she had any preference, and she wrote back and said she was a 'piscopalian, and we hadn't one of them and couldn't get one to oblige her; and I never had no opinion of 'em anyhow, for if they was anyways smart they wouldn't have to have their prayers written all out for 'em. I forgot to say that some of the club wanted a gentleman author. As we'd never hed one here before, and might never hev one again, some of 'em thought best to have the real article while we was about it; but the rest of us concluded a lady author'd come cheaper, and Mis' Stevens settled it by declarin' that she was goin' to do the entertainin' and she wouldn't have a man under foot. Yes, of course, Mr. Stevens

is alive, but she's got him trained so't he don't stay in the house much. They say he keeps store jest so's he can hev a place to stop evenin's.

"After a good deal o' talk we agreed to hev the Readin' in the Baptist meetin'-house to please Mis' Stevens. She vowed she wouldn't entertain the author without we did, and she has the biggest house in the village and the best spare room, and if she happens to be in a good temper she takes three tickets besides, so we always flatter her up and calm her down all we can when there's anything going on. You wa'n't brought up hereabouts, so you ain't familiar with the Stover temper; Mis' Stevens was one of the Stovers of Scarboro', and there was temper enough in that family, if it was thinned out, to spread over the whole o' York County. Peace was the youngest, and she lost one likely beau by kickin' the churn out o' the door jest as he happened to pass by one morning; then she went away on a

visit to Bangor and married Mr. Stevens. He's prospered and she's dretful ambitious. She's bound and determined that Bixby Centre shall keep right up with Bangor and Portland.

"They've had these Author's Readin's in the cities lately, and the Winter Night Club's ben saving up money for one this two years, and they was determined to do it up in style, so they wrote to the author they'd decided on and told her they wa'n't goin' to spare expense, and she could have five dollars and railroad fare if she'd come and read, and she should stop with Mis' Stevens at the Upper Corner, the one who entertained Thomas B. Reed when he was here. She sent word right back that she was expectin' to be in Portland for a month and she could just as well come out as not, and wouldn't trouble us to pay the five dollars. She said it would be pleasure and profit enough to meet the committee that had been correspondin' with her. I didn't sus-

picion that writers was rich enough to refuse a five-dollar bill, but mebbe she had money left to her by somebody, and was kind of independent.

"'What air these Author's Readin's, anyhow?' said Si. 'Can authors read any better'n other folks?'

"'I dunno *as* they can, an' I dunno *but* they can,' says I. 'I suppose we've got to resk our twenty-five cents an' hear 'em, before we can say.'

"When the author was writin' to the secretary of the club she put in a newspaper piece showin' how folks paid a dollar and a half a ticket to hear her read in Cleveland and Si said if anybody was willin' to pay that price to hear an author, and a lady one at that, read her own writin's it was a case of fool and his money bein' soon parted. The secretary hed to come out real blunt and plain and say we allers hed got the best in Bixby Centre for twenty-five cents and we cal'lated we allers should.

"Of course it wa'n't what you would call 'skilled labor,' anyway. She didn't make no pretense hardly; she read straight along, good and clear, but she wa'n't no elocutionist, and she didn't act out anything a mite. In one way she can't hold a candle to that Miss — what's that black-haired girl's name that's cousin to Mis' Tucker of the Lower Corner? Well, anyway, she graduated at a school of oratory, and she's ben here twice an' recited 'Asleep on the Switch' and 'The Maniac.' It comes high, for she has to be drove to and from the deepot, have her supper and breakfast and a dollar in money; but you can't have the same old thing all the year round; folks get tired of it and the house won't be filled.

"Mis' Tucker says her cousin's got real talent, and I guess she has. She's got courage, anyhow, and lungs! They say she took a gold medal the time she graduated. The whole class stood up in a row and recited 'The Maniac,' and she outscreeched

all the rest without half trying. Did you ever hear it, Mis' Strout? The girl in the piece is as crazy as a loon, but she don't know it, and at the end of every verse she says, '*I am not mad! I am not mad!*' Well, this reciter — what *is* her name now? — I know it as well as I do my own! Her mother was one o' them hombly Muckfords that used to live over on the Flag Medder road. Well, anyway, the rest o' the class jest said '*I am not mad*' in the craziest way they could; but when it come her turn they say she put in a screech right in the middle that you could 'a' heard all over the county, and the judges fairly leapt right out o' their seats on the platform. There wa'n't no discussion as to who should have the medal; she earned it and she got it. She's splendid — Eldora Duncombe — that's her name, and I'm glad I've got it at last — but so many of our ladies here sleeps alone in their houses at nights that they told Mis' Tucker they couldn't go hear her

cousin any more unless she read quieter pieces; an' she said if she read quieter pieces what would be the good of knowin' elocution?

"This author wa'n't no elocutionist and no screecher neither, but she hed a kind of a takin' way with her after all — I must say that; though Si thought her hair was full red to read in public with. Did you hear how handsome the church looked? If speakers don't like the pulpit we gen'rally move it one side and have a marble-top table with a pitcher of water and a tumbler, and a boquet of verbenias on it; but there was a girl from Lowell summer-boardin' at Mis' Doctor Smith's — Hazel Perkins her name is — an' she'd ben to an Author's Readin', an' she offered to decorate the platform jest like a parlor. It looked handsome, but land, it was queer! I never see such a collection of onnecessary things in my life. Si said it looked to him as if the Old Boy'd ben havin' an auction on it! And the

trouble that Perkins girl took, borrowin' from all the neighbors that lived within a mile o' the meetin'-house! Why, I declare, the audience stared so at the decorations they didn't pay no kind of attention to the reader. We ain't got so much furniture round here that we don't know the looks of our neighbors' things pretty well, and everybody was cranin' and gapin' and studyin' to see who'd ben asked to lend and who hadn't. Si told Miss Perkins if she'd 'a' put on a bed and a cook-stove the author could 'a' kep' house on the platform and ben real comfortable.

"There was Mis' Trowbridge's banquet lamp that her children got for a prize, sellin' Magic Soap (and there ain't much magic in it, I can tell you that, unless you mix consid'able elbow grease with it!); I thought it was real good in the Trowbridge children to lend that lamp, for it's the only namable stick o' furniture they've got in the room they call their parlor, and they set great

store by it. They'd never lighted it up 'cause they couldn't afford karosene, but anyway Mis' Trowbridge never read a book in her life, I guess, and Dan Trowbridge goes to bed at sundown; Salomy Trowbridge — she's the fourteen-year-old girl — never took her eyes off the lamp the whole evening, and once when it kind o' flared up, and she thought it was goin' to scorch the pink shade, she went right up on the platform and turned it down so't the author couldn't hardly see to read. Almiry Berry's reflecting lamp was on the stage, too, and hanging from it was an ear o' corn gilded, with a thermometer let in where some o' the kernels was took out — it looked real kind o' cute! Widow Buzzell's wicker chair and walnut table set in the centre, and if she hadn't bronzed up the chair with Diamond Paint so't nobody recognized it! Diadema Bascom's foreroom rug was on the floor, and my Batterbug lace tidies on the pulpit chairs. My lunge stood in the back with an Afri-

can over it, and a couple of sofy-pillows stood up on end. What the Perkins girl wanted it there for beats me, for no author that I ever see would lay down while she was readin', and after it's over she'd be glad to go home and go to bed, I should think. I didn't like it a mite that Miss Perkins put the African over it, for we'd just had it new covered with emmanuel cloth and it looked real handsome and shiny; Si's awful fond of lungeing, and I thought I'd buy something this time he *couldn't* lunge out! Well, if you have a decoratin' committee I s'pose you've got to give 'em their heads and let 'em decorate; so I didn't say nothin' to Miss Perkins.

"On the piano was my marble statue of Abraham Lincoln, and Mis' Emerson's pair of tall vases that Huldy Packard sent her from Indiana. Miss Perkins had filled 'em full of goldenrod, but when Judge Thomson come and seen 'em standin' on his wife's new upright pianer he said he couldn't have that

nohow; so when the audience was seatin', and before the Readin' began, Miss Perkins had to empty the water out o' the vases and stick peacock feathers in 'em; and then when the author come her cousin was with her, and she didn't like the peacock feathers 'cause they was unlucky; so poor Miss Perkins hove 'em out the winder and set the vases on the pianer upside down. They're awful hombly, anyway, and they look 'bout as well empty as full, an' standin' 'em bottomside up don't hurt the pattern any.

"The Perkins girl went out on the church steps and cried, she was so hoppin' mad, and when I slipped out o' the back pew to see if I could borry a piece of ice to put in the author's pitcher I see Freedom Cobb, that's home from Dartmouth College, tryin' to comfort her. She don't know that he courts Mis' Doctor Smith's boarders right along summer after summer. Mis' Smith couldn't hold 'em, her meat's so tough, if Freedom didn't kind o' keep 'em contented

courtin' of 'em! I was sorry for her; but there, it wouldn't 'a' done to spill water down into the Thomsons' new pianer the way we done into the one we hired from Edgecombe Falls. Mis' Thomson only let us have hern on condition that we wouldn't ask Clarence Cummins to play on it. He's had lessons for three years, and then, anyway, he's naturally strong in his fingers and powerful muscled all over. You'd certainly think he wouldn't leave a key on the instrument when he gits warmed up. He's a great favorite with the deef, and we've got a lot o' deef folks at Bixby Centre.

"Did you hear anything said about the minister's introduction? That's kind o' queer; the Congregationalists was real proud of his remarks. Of course there's most every sect represented in the Winter Night Club, and then there's some of the members that wouldn't know a sect if they seen one in the middle o' the road, though they do call this a Christian country. We said if the

entertainment was held in the Baptist church our minister had ought to make the opening remarks. We've got a real smart man in Mr. Hobson; some think he's too old, but there! we was about wore out with young students during them four years when we didn't have no settled pastor. Si says to me: 'I declare I'm tired o' settin' in meetin' Sunday after Sunday and hearin' the law laid down to me by them half-fledged boys. Let's have a minister that's feathered out,' said he, 'even if we hev to pay a little more!'

"Well, Mr. Hobson's makin' the introduction didn't leave anything for the Methodist minister to do, and his wife was as mad as hops, but we pacified her by askin' him to give the author a vote of thanks after the Readin', and by puttin' her on the reception committee that met the author at the deepot. The Perkins girl wanted the deepot decorated with goldenrod, but the president of the club said we'd got to leave something to do in case the folks that wrote

'Paradise Lost' or 'Pilgrim's Progress' should come to Bixby to read. So we had the winders washed and the stove blacked, put a new chimbly on the lamp and carried the fly-paper into the telegraph office, and Si said the deepot looked as if 'twas goin' to be married; but the author swished right through it and never looked at the stove nor the winders, so we had our labor for our pains.

"The weather looked a little mite lowery at noon, and Mis' Stevens was afraid she'd have to git out her covered carry-all to go for the author, but the sun came out and it breezed up real nice just after three o'clock. I don't think Mis' Stevens was ever uglier or contrarier in her life than she was that afternoon, but we excused her, for she was most tired to death. Her hired girl is sick, and she'd ben helpin' her cook up flour-food for the author, sellin' tickets over to the Centre, and finishin' a worsted-work 'God Bless Our Home' to hang over the spare-

room bed. Si said he guessed the comp'ny would find out before she left that house that God done the only blessin' it was likely to git, and he was about right. She didn't like it a mite because Mis' Doctor Smith shook hands with the author first, and it was kind o' forth-puttin'. Mis' Stevens is the president of the Baptist and Mis' Doctor Smith of the Congregational Ladies' Aid, and most of the quarrelin' and pull-haulin' in the churches is between them two societies. They aid the church consid'able, I s'pose, but they do hender each other awf'ly; I'll say that for 'em!

"Well, it turned out a beautiful night, and the meetin'-house was packed to the doors. Everything went off as neat as a pin when we once got the Readin' goin', but the committee had consid'able trouble at the start. First there was the fuss I told you 'bout Mis' Thomson's pianer, and Hazel Perkins hed to hev her cry out on Freedom Cobb's shoulder, and then it turned out

there wa'n't no ice for the water-pitcher; and those that hed reserved seats in the choir was in trouble. You see Miss Perkins hed put appleboughs along the front o' the singin'-seats and on top o' the organ. There must 'a' ben caterpillars' nests in 'em, and I s'pose the Decorating Committee hed et their lunch up there and dropped crumbs, but 't any rate the folks was kep' busy killin' ants an' caterpillars. One woman that was a stranger to me said she didn't cal'late to pay extry for a seat an' then be et up in it.

"The next thing was that Doctor Woodside couldn't be found to take the author up the broad aisle on his arm and hand her over to the minister. I was 'bout sick o' trottin', but I went out again and found him settin' in the graveyard as comf'table as could be, smokin' there on a tombstone, with the full moon shinin' on his white hair. He's one o' the smartest men in town, but some folks call him kind o' queer in the head. He does

spend a good deal of his time in the graveyard, but Si says it's only natural because most of his patients is there! Then, as if that wa'n't enough, Vilruvias Bennett, that was sellin' tickets at the door, was called home, and they wanted Si to take his place, an' Si was huntin' after Almiry Berry's horse that had broke away an' carried part o' the meetin'-house fence.

"You'd heard Vilruvias's brother, Abel Bennett, died that night, didn't you? Well, did you know how suddent it was? He'd never hed a sick day in his life, so we hed no hopes of ever gettin' red of him; though there wa'n't a worse husband nor father nor neighbor in Bixby. His mother hed consid'able better 'a' named him Cain than Abel, but you can't never tell by lookin' at little mites o' bald-headed, red-faced things in cradles whether they're going to turn out Abels or Cains. Well, he'd refused to buy a ticket to the Readin', and he never would let his wife join the club; but about

half-past six o'clock the very night o' the entertainment he eat a hearty supper of brown bread and pork and beans, got up and took his hat, kicked the dog and the cat and cuffed the children, which he'd done every night and mornin' faithful for twelve years, went out the side door and expired right there on the rubber door-mat where Mis' Bennett would have to step on him to get out; and it'll be easier for a camel to get through the needle's eye than for him to git int' the Kingdom, that's all I've got to say, and I'm a woman o' few words!

"Nobody knew what Vilruvias was called away for till after the Readin', so there wa'n't no excitement at the entertainment. The author said afterwards when the committee was givin' her a colation (it was an elegant one, too — lemon pie and jelly cake and marble cake and caraway cookies, and root beer and lemonade) that if she had known it she should 'a' ben afraid it was a bad sign.

"'Not if you'd ever hed Abel Bennett for a neighbor,' said Si; and he was about right, though it sounds hard to say it, and he didn't but jest a few times!

"No, I ain't said much about the Readin' itself, for ef you're on a committee you're too busy to listen to anything that goes on. The author looked pretty and appeared pretty; she got on first-rate with Mis' Stevens, and gave her a book, with writin' in the front of it, that Mis' Stevens keeps on her marble-top table in the parlor. Si says ef Mis' Stevens ever wants to dispose of it the writin' will spoil the trade, but I tell him the author meant all right, and Mis' Stevens is too well off to sell a present that was give to her, anyway. The audience was real pleased with the author, and she said they was awful easy to read to, and awful quick at takin' a joke; but I told her it wa'n't no ordinary State o' Maine audience she hed in Bixby: a place that has its three churches and two settled ministers and four college

graduates, an' a Readin' Club an' a High School and a drinkin' fountain! She said no, she couldn't expect to meet with such folks everywhere, but the remembrance of hevin' once enjoyed sech advantages would keep her up when she was hevin' hard times in other places. I thought that was real modest and pretty of her.

"She wa'n't no great reader, as I say, and she wa'n't no great writer for that matter, and I can't hardly see why they should make a fuss over her in the cities. Her stories might 'a' happened anywhere, most; they never did happen, I s'pose, but they sounded so natural and likely that it couldn't 'a' ben much work to write 'em down. I declare if she'd 'a' ben here this afternoon and took down what we've said, 'twould 'a' ben 'bout as good as what she read that night. I wouldn't wonder if I could write a couple of books a year jest like hers, but I don't s'pose it pays so well as goin' out by the day sewin', an', as Si says, we're in this world for a livin', not for notoriety.

"The next mornin' the committee went to the deepot to see the author off, and the four young men ushers was there, too, with the biggest and about the hombliest boquet I ever set eyes on! I don't hardly know how she could 'a' took it in her hand without changin' color. I got there first, and I was glad I did, for the deepot master hed forgot and laid out that old fly-paper all over the benches in the waitin'-room, and I hed a chance to yank it out o' sight and dust down the stove-pipe before she come in. Mis' Stevens looked real smilin' for once, and asked her to come back and make her a visit when it was cooler weather and her hired girl was over the whoopin'-cough.

"Mr. Hobson was there, and he handed her an envelope with two railroad tickets to Portland inside of it. It was just like him to buy the tickets and put 'em in an envelope; the other minister would 'a' counted the dollar and seventeen cents into her hand — and just as she was gettin' on the train the

president of the Readin' Club stepped up and presented her with an album that hed the photographs of all the members pasted in it.

"Si says it ain't the handsomest club in the United States, even when it gets its best clothes on; but that's nothin' but a man's way of runnin' down women's clubs. We ain't all good lookin', to be sure, and most of the pictures was taken in country daguerreon saloons, where they don't flatter folks up much. I did kind o' wish Lowisy Burrage hed hed her new glasses and Aurelia Hanson her waved front piece before they was taken, but the author was too tickled for anything to git such a handsome present, and she said so; and says the president of the club to her, 'You ain't a mite tickleder'n we be to give it to you!' Then the train went off, the author lookin' back from the platform, the committee wavin' their handkerchiefs, and Mr. Hobson 'n' the four ushers swingin' their hats at her.

"All in all it was 'bout the most successful entertainment we ever hed here to Bixby, and we made forty dollars clear, though the land knows we put work enough into it to make seventy-five! There's one thing certain, wherever that author goes readin' she won't find any place that'll do the thing up in the same style as the Winter Night Club did when it entertained her at Bixby!

"Must you go so soon, Mis' Strout? Well, it's ben real nice to see you and hear all the news from Milliken's Mills."

THE QUILT OF HAPPINESS

THE QUILT OF HAPPINESS

I

RIVERBORO, that generally assumed an indifferent and semi-recumbent attitude when it observed strangers, sat up and took notice the moment that Rebecca Rowena Randall arrived on the noon stage from up-country and alighted at the brick house on the main street of the village. Mrs. Perkins, the nearest neighbor, with her only daughter, Emma Jane, palpitating with interest beside her, watched the cautious descent of the little passenger from the stage and the particularly tempestuous tweak she gave her headgear as her feet touched the earth. Then they watched with equal interest the lifting of her hair trunk from the back of the stage by Jerry Cobb; the appearance of Miss

Jane on the stone steps; and well at the rear, the tall, grim figure of Miranda Sawyer.

Mrs. Perkins could see Miranda's greeting in the shape of a bony finger directing the child to wipe her dusty feet on the mat; then the screen door of the brick house slammed behind her, and Rebecca was a member of the brick-house family and a citizen of Riverboro.

"Poor little mite!" sighed Mrs. Perkins.

"Can I go over and see her now?" asked Emma Jane, already cherishing hopes of intimacy.

"Of course you can't!" responded her mother briskly. "Do you s'pose Mirandy wants the house full o' comp'ny the minute Rebecca gits there?"

"Just me wouldn't make it full," objected Emma Jane.

"It takes precious few to make a house too full to please Mirandy Sawyer!" and Mrs. Perkins resumed her seat at the window overlooking the river. "You can keep an

eye on the gate, an' if they let her ou'doors again to-night you can run over and scrape acquaintance, if you want to."

Now Rebecca's vivid little personality had been somewhat obscured in the big family of children at Sunnybrook Farm, but in Riverboro it had the effect of a Roman candle suddenly bursting among the lesser fireworks on a Fourth-of-July evening. She was extraordinarily gregarious and within a year knew everybody on both sides of the river. "Anybody'll do for Rebecca so long's it's folks!" grumbled her Aunt Miranda. "This street is gen'ally chock-full o' young ones nowadays, and Rebecca's always eggin' 'em on to somethin' new. When she asks me if she can borrer the silver call bell an' I see her makin' off with a lead pencil an' paper, I always suspicion she's organizin' somethin'."

Miranda was right. There had been a positive epidemic of organizations in Riverboro's "younger set" in the last few months.

Most of them had died an early, though natural, death, while others had been put out of existence by unfeeling parents and guardians. Miss Dearborn, the village teacher, was really the inspiring force behind the first one. Feeling a lack of common purpose in the district school, she had proposed a club for general improvement and public service of some sort. In order to develop initiative and executive ability, she asked the older girls and boys to meet alone to draft a constitution and choose a name. She was somewhat confused when they issued from their executive session quickly and firmly entitled The Jolly Jumpers, and learned that the officers were to be selected, not for intellectual or moral superiority, but according to the height that they were able to jump over a broomstick. This unintentionally athletic society still had its healthful and noisy meetings now and again, although it never fulfilled Miss Dearborn's ambitions.

The Guild of Ministering Sisters could not find anybody who desired its ministrations, but one or two secret societies were in a flourishing condition, notably The Bouncers. Mr. Perkins, the local blacksmith, had a way of saying to the young people, when they had interrupted his horse-shoeing long enough: "Now clear out, young ones, or I'll bounce ye!" The idea of this picturesquely named society was that, if any member should be caught cheating in games or lessons, fibbing or tale-bearing, or in other misdemeanors of equal magnitude, he — or she — would find a card on desk, or in hat, with this neatly printed phrase on it:

YOU ARE HEREBY BOUNCED

The shame and terror of this card oppressed the most callous boy, and, his mind reverting to the last sin that he had committed and wondering how it could have been found out, he promptly turned over a new leaf in order to be reinstated in good society.

The success of the month of June had been a club called The Pantry Rioters. Romeo Smith, a dimpled, wide-mouthed, freckle-faced boy was the founder, and the first members were all of the (then) superior sex. The girls, however, discovered the general intentions of the club, and Rebecca drafted such an engaging constitution and by-laws that the boys chivalrously widened the gates of membership. Rebecca, whose eligibility as an active member did not admit a shadow of doubt, was constrained to decline all but honorary connection with The Pantry Rioters; and those who knew the discipline of the brick house admitted the wisdom of her decision. "But oh, how I could riot if only I wasn't being fed and clothed and slept and schooled by Aunt Miranda!" thought Rebecca passionately, as she carefully copied the by-laws of The Pantry Rioters:

"1. No member shall riot in anybody's else pantry but his own.

"2. No member shall attack the swing-shelf or wire netting box in the cellar as being too easy and not risky enough, and not a pantry anyway.

"3. No member shall be greedy or really thievish, nor shall he nibble or take away anything that is needed for the next meal, if he knows it; this being not nice, besides making trouble all round.

"4. Any member who does a rioting act of great daring right under the eye of the enemy shall be allowed to wear a red button to school.

"5. Any member who is caught in the act of rioting and reprimanded, and so forth, shall wear a blue button to school and describe all the circumstances, however painful, at a meeting of the club, where he will receive comfort and sympathy.

"6. Any little titbit subtracted from the pantry may be shared with another member, thus removing any suspicion of evil from rioting; the idea being to show that a person

could take a tart, doughnut, frosted cake, or spoonful of preserves at any time if only he was not so good and honest."

Oh, how delicious were the last school days of the June term when The Pantry Rioters first came into being! Who could forget the morning when Romeo Smith arrived at school flushed and panting and took his place in the line within one minute of being tardy? And there, in the buttonhole of his coat lapel, gleamed the red badge of courage, the button covered by the girls with scarlet ribbon, but never worn before!

At ten o'clock Miss Dearborn remarked: "Romeo Smith is well prepared with his lessons and is behaving himself with perfect propriety, except for a perpetual grin, for which I can see no reason. However, as many of the scholars cannot help staring at him, I would ask him please to remove the red button he is wearing and place it in his vest pocket."

In the reading lesson when Sam Simpson

came to the phrase, "The spy gave a paltry excuse," he read it, "pantry excuse," and there was such a flood of laughter let loose in the schoolroom that Miss Dearborn was obliged to say: "Did no one ever mistake a word before? It is not polite to make fun of another scholar. You may be the next one yourself."

And then, after school, to hear from Romeo's lips that his mother, in passing out of the pantry with a colander full of fresh doughnuts under her left arm, had paused to lean from the window and speak to her husband; whereupon Romeo, with magnificent audacity — grandmother in adjacent kitchen, mother holding pan, and father outside window — had seized a hot doughnut and, mindful of the red button, had further tempted fate by taking the knife from the cheese plate and carving off a piece two inches wide! With this rich booty, avoiding the safe side door, he went through the living-room, passing a visiting aunt and two

younger brothers of highly suspicious disposition, and sped to school in time to avoid the tardy mark.

"How perfectly elegant!" ejaculated Emma Jane Perkins.

"Where is the doughnut?" asked Rebecca, mindful of the sixth by-law.

"I had nowheres to keep it but under my hat, so I et it up; but you can see the place where it was." And Romeo exhibited the shiny circular spot on the top of his head where the hot doughnut had lain.

II

School had been closed for two weeks now, and one afternoon Rebecca leaned over her gate and surveyed the landscape. Emma Jane Perkins was watching from her doorway, and Alice Robinson from hers, while several other girls were concealed behind board-piles or clumps of trees, waiting for the hour of play to arrive. Suddenly all hearts leaped with gladness, for Rebecca

was seen to remove the brown ribbon from one of her braids and put it in her apron pocket, and to substitute a piece of bright pink, legal tape.

"What are you doing to your hair, Rebecca?" asked Aunt Jane, coming to the door unexpectedly.

"Changing one of my ribbons, Aunt Jane."

"What for, child?"

"Well, it's a secret, Aunt Jane, but I don't mind telling you a little bit: it's a signal. I can't fire a cannon or build a bonfire on the heights, so this is just a way of telling the girls I've got an idea."

"I should think they might guess that, any time, without your decking yourself out like a horse at a cattle fair," smiled Aunt Jane.

Rebecca laughed and shook her long braids. "But it's such a nice, ladylike, romantic way of signaling, Aunt Jane!"

"Well, maybe it is; but take it off before you come in the house, won't you?"

"As if I wouldn't, Aunt Jane? And, anyway, my idea is new, but it joins on to something you and Aunt Miranda know about already — Miss Roxy's quilt."

"Oh!" sighed Miss Jane comfortably. "If it's nothing worse than that I won't worry."

"It's a beautiful idea!" and Rebecca glowed. "The girls will love it, and Miss Dearborn, and the minister's wife; and you would, too, but I mustn't show partiality between you and Aunt Miranda. The mothers will think it's silly, so it's got to be kept secret."

"I don't know. They all approved of your making extra patchwork, and if you're any happier to put your work together so that it will amount to something, and if you want to give it away, why, it's all to your credit, and it doesn't cost any one family much. You'd better give up the notion of quilting it, Rebecca."

"Oh, why, Aunt Jane?"

"Because you five girls could never finish it by cold weather. I'll put it in the frame for you and teach you how to 'tack' it."

"We all know how to quilt," objected Rebecca.

"Yes, but you don't know what it is to take those thousands of little stitches all in even rows. You can't break your thread, or make knots, or pucker the quilt; and the part near the edges of the frame is very hard to do neatly. Have you chosen your pattern?"

"No, we'll choose the pattern this afternoon. We've looked at all the spare bedroom quilts there are in Riverboro. There's Mrs. Perkins's 'Goose Chase,' and Mrs. Robinson's 'Church Steps,' Mrs. Milliken's 'Rising Sun,' Mrs. Watson's 'Job's Troubles,' Mrs. Meserve's 'Duck's Foot in the Mud,' and —"

Miss Jane put her fingers in her ears. "Goodness gracious, Rebecca, how you do run on! I hope you don't forget your Aunt

Miranda's 'Johnny Round the Corner'; but don't you girls fly too high or you'll come down heavy. You can get gay, pretty pieces and put four in a square and then join your squares corner to corner with plain ones in between. Perhaps Mrs. Perkins will have some new goods to help you out, and that'll set off the patchwork. Now, it's four o'clock and you can go and play, Rebecca."

Rebecca sped like an arrow shot from a bow, Emma Jane sped contemporaneously; Alice Robinson, Candace Milliken, and Persis Watson appeared as suddenly as if they had been concealed in woodchuck holes.

Miss Jane looked wistfully after the five slim little figures disappearing with arms about one another's waists and heads close together. "A child makes a wonderful difference," she thought. "I don't know what Aurelia's other children are like, but I can't think how she could part with Rebecca, even to get her educated! Anyhow it's put the sun back into the sky for me!"

III

Old Miss Roxanna Lyman lived half a mile up the river road and an eighth of a mile up a lane that led from it and stopped at her dooryard. Why the house was ever built there was a mystery. If you were a stranger in Riverboro and were walking up to play with the Simpson children and found everybody away from home, and had spied high-bush blueberries a little farther on, and chokecherry trees in full bearing in a green lane, that you had never noticed before, and had strayed along the grass-grown road that had known hardly a wagon wheel for years, you would finally have passed an obscuring clump of trees and come suddenly upon Miss Roxy's little black house.

At least that was what Rebecca did. The door was open, and sitting in a rocking-chair in the tiny entry was, as Rebecca reported to Miss Jane later, "the very most sorrow-

fullest old lady any one had ever seen." No one could have told her age. She was slight and spare; she was huddled in a gray shawl; the wrinkles in her face — wrinkles of pain, anxiety, grief, poverty, and foreboding — fairly made a lattice-work on the skin. You knew by looking at her that no one had gone out from the black house in the morning and no one was coming back to it at night.

Rebecca had heard of her and instantly asked: "Are you Miss Roxy Lyman? Please excuse me for stumbling right into your dooryard. I didn't see there was one till I was in it."

"Yes. I'm Roxy Lyman," said the old lady in a voice that trembled with surprise and suggested the rarity of callers. "Won't you set down a spell?"

Rebecca needed no second invitation to embark on a new experience. She sank down on the step, flung her hat on the grass and pushed the hair back from her warm

forehead. "I'm Rebecca Rowena Randall," she explained fluently. "My home is at Sunnybrook Farm, up Temperance way, but I'm living with my two Aunt Sawyers at the brick house so's to get educated. There's no education in Temperance, just plain teaching, and only a few months a year. Sometimes we didn't have any lessons at all, because when there were big boys it took all teacher's time to make them behave. Down here Miss Dearborn can manage a big boy as easy as anything, so of course we have nothing to do but learn."

This was only the natural beginning of a cataract of conversation, and the acquaintance between Rebecca and Miss Roxy Lyman was now well started. Rebecca proceeded to open her mind on a dozen subjects of passionate interest to herself. Clasping her knees with her hands, she rippled on in a way never permitted at the brick house.

"I like the way your house is set," she said; "side end to the road, looking down

over the fields and seeing the river flowing-ways. I think a black house with vines growing over it is nice too; a white one is always so stare-y. The river's splendid company, don't you think so?"

"It's all I have," was the reply. "I don't look at it much nowadays."

"I get tired of looking at the same old hat, but I never get used to the old river somehow; but perhaps it isn't quite enough company all by itself. Of course there's the trees."

"They ain't leaved out the year round," said Miss Roxy.

"No-o-o. But you're sure they *will* 'leave out.'" All this time Rebecca had stolen little side glances at Miss Roxy. "I suppose you read when you're not doing housework?" she ventured.

"I've read all my books over and over so I just set an' think!" And Miss Roxy's eyes wandered from Rebecca, as if she had already outlived the experience of meeting a new face and hearing a new voice.

"Well, all I was going to say is," said Rebecca, rising to her feet at this warning signal, "that there was a very sick lady, sick and lame and old, that lived half a mile from our farm, and mother always had me go over and tell her the news once or twice a week. Mother says everybody ought to know what's going on, or they get lonesome. I've come away from that lady so I think I'd better take you in her place if you'd like to have me. There's such a lot happens down our way — awfully interesting things, too — that I could reel it off by the yard this minute, only you seem tired. And I've got two books of my own to lend you, so I'll come soon again if Aunt Miranda'll let me. Shall I?"

Rebecca's demeanor and tone were modest and innocent, but Miss Roxy felt herself in the grip of a master hand and feebly assented. "I don't mind if you do," she said, making an effort, and bringing her eyes back to the quaint, vivid little creature

standing in front of her on the greensward. "Mebbe you'd liven me up."

"Oh, I would!" And Rebecca's tone was full of confidence. "Aunt Miranda says I'd stir up a cemetery; but that isn't a compliment. She doesn't like being stirred up; but I'd be real careful with you, being a stranger and not very well! Good-bye!" And Rebecca flew down the lane, her long, dark braids flying out behind her; while Miss Roxy, in spite of herself, rose to her feet by the rocking-chair and watched the child out of sight.

IV

THERE were many meetings after that. Sometimes Rebecca took one of the other girls and they carried a bouquet of wild flowers to put in a tumbler on the kitchen table, or some apples or berries or nuts that they had picked on the road; but it was easy to see that one caller at a time was all that Miss Roxy fancied. She had very little to

eat and very little fuel, though she was known to receive ten dollars a month from a nephew in Salem, so that Riverboro was comfortably sure that she could not starve; and as for firewood, the same nephew had a load, all sawed and split, deposited in her shed twice a year. These mercies gave assurance of existence if not of luxury; and, anyway, Riverboro could not waste its time over an incurably sad, cold, strange, silent woman like Roxanna Lyman, even if her family had been one of the best in former years.

Once Rebecca had knocked at Miss Roxy's door without receiving any answer and, peeping into the window of the downstairs chamber where she slept, had seen her lying on her bed with the gray shawl round her shoulders and a man's military coat over her feet. Like lightning the thought flashed through the child's mind: "Why not make a quilt for Miss Roxy?"

Patchwork had to be sewed, day in and

day out, as was the custom. There were never enough sheets to oversew, and needlework was a Christian duty; therefore, patchwork — in and out of season. It was cheap, too. Nobody would mind if she and the other girls did extra work, begged their own pieces, and gave away the result for a Thanksgiving or Christmas present. The matter had been put before mothers and aunts, accepted, and scraps already collected. It only remained to choose the design.

So far so good; but that was not why Rebecca had tied pink tape on one of her pigtails — not at all! The mere notion of the quilt, a secret from all the village save the families involved — this had enchanted the five girls from the beginning; but something else was unfolded in the pine-grove meeting.

"You see," said Rebecca, "I was up to Miss Roxy's last night and she'd been crying. She cries 'most every day."

"What for, I wonder? She lives alone, so there's nobody to be cross to her," said Alice Robinson, who had troubles of her own.

"I guess it's the things that have happened in bygone days." (Rebecca had an incurably literary style in conducting meetings, and indulged unconsciously in flights of sentiment and rhetoric.) "Her mother and father died and her brother embezzled and Aunt Jane thinks that a gentleman played with her feelings and she's never been the same since."

"'Played with her feelings!' What's that?" inquired the unsentimental Emma Jane Perkins.

"Gave her hopes and then married another without saying so much as 'Boo,'" explained Rebecca.

"And there was a sister that did something dreadful, I don't exactly know what," hinted Candace darkly; "but she lives out West and Miss Roxy writes and writes to her, but she never answers."

"And she was the one Miss Roxy loved best of all," added Rebecca with a tear in her voice. "I asked her yesterday why she didn't sit in the kitchen with a window open and not in the little front entry that'll hardly hold her rocking-chair. She said if anybody should come any time suddenly she could get down the steps quicker to meet them. She never comes down to any of us, and I know it's the sister she means. Oh, dear!"

"Mother's awful sorry for her," was Persis's comment. "But everybody's kind of lost sympathy for her because she lives so out of creation, and it's so much work to get there."

"Well" — and Rebecca leaned toward the group confidentially — "I was thinking about it night before last as I was leaning over the gate. Now look the other way, girls, and don't laugh while I explain. All of a sudden I thought the pieces of our quilt will be scraps of dresses; why not take those

that we, and all the other people, have had the loveliest times in? We could put them everywhere but round the edges, everywhere they'd touch Miss Roxy, I mean — on her neck and shoulders and arms and waist and knees. It'd be a quilt of happiness then; that's my idea!" And Rebecca waited with flushing cheeks and downcast eyes for the verdict.

There was a breathless pause of half a minute. Emma Jane seldom moved her mind in the presence of Rebecca, feeling that competition was impossible; still she was the first to break the silence with her customary ejaculation: "I think it would be perfectly elegant!"

Alice Robinson nodded her curly head responsively and said: "'Quilt of Happiness!' It sounds lovely, if we don't have to tell anybody grown up who would say it's silly."

"But can happiness strike *into* anybody?" inquired Candace, who, as the daughter of

an Orthodox deacon, went to the foundation of things.

Rebecca was inclined to evade the direct question, inasmuch as her cherished idea had no real basis save one of pure sentiment.

"I can't help feeling that if we just collect scraps of happiness," she said shyly, "and cut and stitch and tack happiness into the quilt, all in secret, that Miss Roxy'd feel warmer in it, though, of course, she'd never guess why."

"Well," answered Candace, a little unconvinced but generously approving, "I think it couldn't do any harm to try."

"And there's just one person we might tell, for she'd understand and help us get the right pieces without telling our secret, and that's teacher." This suggestion from Persis Watson.

Rebecca clapped her hands delightedly.

"Now here comes the greatest piece of news, and I've been saving it up till the end! I *did* tell Miss Dearborn, last evening.

I couldn't help it, because I couldn't be sure my idea wasn't foolish till one other person had heard it — and *what* do you think she told me? She's engaged to be married! Miss Dearborn's engaged to be married!"

This was chanted joyously while Rebecca skipped over the pine-needle carpet in circles and waved her arms triumphantly.

A chorus of "Oh!" and "Ah!" and "Who to?" woke the echoes.

Rebecca sat down again cross-legged and proceeded to the telling of a tale which from the beginning of the world has evoked the keenest joy in the narrator and the most rapt attention from the audience.

"How did she happen to tell you first?" asked Persis with a spice of envy in her tone.

"Just because I was there almost at the very identical minute when He went away."

"Who? Her beau?" inquired Alice, blushing to the roots of her hair.

"Yes; and she'd never tell Mrs. Bangs a

thing like *that!*" (Mrs. Bangs was a lady of difficult temper with whom Miss Dearborn boarded as painlessly as possible.) "Don't you know how you feel when you're full to bursting with splendid news? That's how Miss Dearborn was. Do you remember the tall gentleman that came from Hartford two Saturday nights and went to meeting with her next day?"

"Yes!" in chorus. "Was that him?" (Miss Dearborn spoke and taught good English; but there are some things that human beings are powerless to teach — or learn!)

"Yes. His name is Robert Hunt, and teacher says he's an ab-so-lute-ly glorious man!"

"I didn't know there was any glorious men," said Persis. "I wisht I'd looked at him harder in meetin'. When they goin' to be married?"

"Not till next summer, though he's pleaded for an early date. (That's what

she said.) She wants to teach here till the spring term's over so's to buy her wedding clothes, and aren't you glad we'll have her one more winter? Now, why doesn't somebody ask me what my news is?"

"Gracious! Is there any more?" they cried.

"Of course! Or what has all this to do with our quilt? Miss Dearborn just loved the idea of its being a quilt of happiness. She kissed me lots of times, and then she got up and looked in the glass and twirled herself round and held up her skirt and danced, and she had on the dress we like best — the pink delaine with the moss rosebuds on it — and she said, thinking it out as she went along: 'Rebecca, I've had so much happiness to-day I must give part of it away! When Mr. Hunt asked me to marry him this afternoon, I had on this dress. The waist is nearly worn out, but the skirt is as good as new. It's got six breadths in it, and it'll make a beautiful lining for Miss Roxy's

quilt!' Then I said: 'Oh, that'll be lovely if you can spare it; but, darling Miss Dearborn — excuse me for speaking of it — they say that long ago a gentleman from Boston played with Miss Roxy's feelings and that's partly the reason she's so unhappy, and oughtn't you to be perfectly sure that Mr. Hunt isn't playing with yours before you give away any clothes?'"

"That was very thoughtful of you, Rebecca," commented Persis approvingly. "And what did she say?"

"Oh! She fell into her rocking-chair and laughed and laughed till the tears rolled down her cheeks. Then she stood up and took the dress right off her back and kissed the waist of it and —"

Emma Jane's china-blue eyes were popping out of her head. Her mind was hurrying to keep up with Rebecca's tale, but it seemed half a league behind as she ejaculated: "Kissed her waist? Wha' for?"

Rebecca looked embarrassed, both at the

interruption at the high-water mark of her story and at the lack of comprehension. Also, it was a difficult action to explain in words; one whose meaning was to be felt with a blush and a heartbeat, but not dragged into the open and enlarged upon in bald speech.

"Just think it over, Emma Jane, for I can't talk about it," she said. "If you'd only read 'Ivanhoe,' as I wanted you to, or even 'Cora, the Doctor's Wife' or 'The Pearl of Orr's Island,' you'd know lots more about things."

"I know!" cried Candace triumphantly. "She'd had on the dress when he asked her to marry him, and she loved it."

"I can see how she'd kiss him, but I'd never 'a' thought of her kissin' a waist!" murmured Emma Jane obstinately.

"Well, she did!" Rebecca went on with heightened color. "She kissed it more'n twenty times as quick as lightning and hung it up in the closet, and then she laughed

and cried some more and said: 'Oh, Rebecca, if you only knew how sure I am that Mr. Hunt isn't playing with my feelings; but I must tell him about your warning! Here, dear,' she said, rolling the skirt into a bundle, 'you'll have to piece the breadths to make them long enough, but feather-stitching will cover the seams and, oh! I want to give it away right now when it's just warm with gladness and let it go to poor Miss Roxy, who hasn't got a splendid man to love her and take care of her like my Robert!' — that's what she called him." Rebecca's voice broke; her eyes glistened; her cheeks glowed.

Indeed, the little group of budding women all felt vague thumpings and stirrings of something on the left side that had heretofore been silent. "Well, I declare!" "How perfectly elegant!" "Isn't it sweet of her!" "And now we've got our lining that's worried us the most." "And it's just fallen from heaven like the manna in the Bible!"

"And how wonderful to have a happiness lining all ready to put in our happiness quilt, the first happiness quilt that ever was! It simply must make a little difference in Miss Roxy's feelings!"

"And to think that we're the only ones in Riverboro to know that teacher's engaged to be married! It'll be all over the village to-morrow, and we knew it first! Oh, Rebecca, it's been the most wonderful meeting we've ever had, and when we see a pink tape on your pigtail again we'll run harder than ever!"

These and a dozen other excited comments fell from the girls' lips as they made their way home from the pine-grove meeting.

The collecting of the happiness pieces did not turn out to be a task of insuperable difficulty. The children themselves furnished a goodly number. There were some scraps of Rebecca's pink gingham, her first dress of the color she adored but had never

hitherto possessed, having worn out her sister Hannah's clothes ever since she was born. Emma Jane gave bits of her Scotch plaid poplin, called the handsomest dress ever worn in Riverboro's younger set. There were squares from frocks in which Persis and Candace had received school prizes and Alice Robinson had worn in tableaux. Alice was always in tableaux on account of her pink-and-white skin and golden hair, and was always cast for "the angel," although she had a most uncertain disposition.

The minister's wife, confidentially consulted, had contributed the full sleeves and shoulder cape of the dress she "appeared bride in" the Sunday after her wedding.

"I had to walk up the aisle and sit in my pew all alone that summer, Rebecca, and I was only seventeen," she said. "Sometimes I thought it would be nice to be married to just a man that belonged to me only, and

have him sit beside me in meeting; but then I remembered how grateful I ought to be that my husband belonged to God."

Aunt Jane gave two squares of the cherry-colored glacé silk that she wore when she danced with the Governor of Maine at an inauguration ball at Augusta.

Aunt Miranda never knew that the quilt had any sentimental notions worked into it or she would have thrown cold water on the entire proposition; but in her ignorance she looked over her piece-bag one rainy afternoon with Rebecca. Suddenly she chanced upon a bit of dun-colored stuff that resembled hair-cloth in texture.

"There!" she exclaimed. "That was the best dress I ever had! It wore me like iron! I put two braids on the bottom of it the fourth year and new under-arm pieces the next spring, and I believe it lasted me nine seasons. I never had so much comfort out of anything as that dress! It's a pleasure to look back upon!"

"Did you look nice in it, Aunt Miranda?" Rebecca inquired with interest.

"I don' know's I ever noticed," her aunt replied absent-mindedly. "I know it covered me up, an' that's what dresses are for, I guess."

"Can I have a piece of it and one of your gray cashmere, too?" asked Rebecca; and as she put it in her sewing basket she thought: "I wonder if Aunt Miranda never came any closer to happiness than that!"

V

I AM afraid that from an artistic standpoint the quilt of happiness was not a very handsome one. The idea having been the most important thing in the working-out of the design, every conceivable kind of stuff had been employed — calico, gingham, silk, poplin, percale, alpaca, Henrietta cloth, delaine, velveteen, challie, and cashmere; but the squares had been combined with such loving care that the effect was gay and attractive, if a little bizarre.

At any rate, the very angels themselves might have been pleased to look down on the five bright heads — yellow, chestnut, auburn, and brown — that bent every day over their self-imposed task!

There were five lame middle fingers aching from the pressure of brass thimbles, and five forefingers pricked with needle marks, but there were no complaints.

Rebecca's energy flagged now and then, for long and monotonous tasks were not her strong point; and, if it had not been a quilt of happiness, her share in it might never have been accomplished. It was just a little girl's dream — rainbow-tinted, fanciful, baseless; but it danced in and out of the patchwork squares like a vagrant summer breeze, and somehow it danced through the heart, too, ripening and sweetening it.

And at last, in late November, there came a day of days when, in an empty chamber at Emma Jane's house (Miranda Sawyer had refused to have the girls bringing in dirt

and carrying it up and down the stairs of the brick house), Mrs. Perkins and Aunt Jane stretched the quilt into its frame, suspended on the backs of four wooden chairs. Miss Dearborn, who grew prettier every day and came from the post-office in the afternoons all smiles and beams and dimples, had made the happiness lining herself and featherstitched the seams.

Mrs. Perkins, whose father had been a storekeeper, leaving her enormous riches in the shape of new goods, brought from her attic her contribution of rolls of sheet wadding.

Now the outside, the wadding, and the lining were held carefully in place by hands that were moist with excitement and responsibility, and the tacking of the three smoothly together with bright-colored worsteds proved to be the most difficult task that the girls had yet confronted.

There was a week's work in all this, and two or three afternoons when the binding

of the four long sides was done; but, by dint of perseverance, the last stitch was put into the quilt on the day before Christmas, when Aunt Jane had prophesied New Year's as the nearest possible date of completion. The girls gazed at their work with uncontrollable admiration and reverence.

"I'm sick to death of it!" exclaimed Rebecca. "I love it to distraction, and I never want to see another as long as I live! How can anybody make 'em for fun? I could hug it, I'm so fond of it, and slap it, I'm so tired of it!" And the girls echoed her sentiments, though in less picturesque and vigorous language.

"If we give it to her to-day, she'll have something to be thankful for on Christmas Day," the girls decided. "We'll have to lug it up together, and let Rebecca go in with it, while we stay out in the road and wait."

"Don't say 'lug,' and let's go after dark," Rebecca suggested. "I believe I can open the door and put it down softly in the entry

with our letter; then I won't get thanked all by myself, which wouldn't be fair; and we can take turns going up to-morrow to hear what she says."

"Mother's going to send her a big plate of dinner," said Alice.

"Oh, joy!" And Rebecca took out the pink tape from her apron pocket and tied it on a pigtail.

"What is it?" the girls asked breathlessly in chorus.

"Why, once there was a very important paper that had to be sent to a certain king by one of his generals, and he stationed messengers ten miles apart all along the road from his camp to the king's palace. One man galloped for ten miles, got off his hot, steaming charger and handed the message to another man, who was all ready and waiting on a fresh horse. He galloped on to the next man, and so on. We'll do the same with Miss Roxy's dinner, each of us making believe it's horseback, and running like mad to

give the basket to the next one. Then it'll get there piping hot!"

Christmas Eve fell cold and bleak, with a north wind and an uncertain moon. The girls put on mittens and hoods and, starting at six o'clock, when it was quite dark, they carried the quilt as they walked, Indian file, along the frozen road. They met no one, just as they had planned, for as the affair had begun in secrecy, so it was hoped to end it. That was half the fun.

The Simpson cottage, with its yard completely filled with ramshackle vehicles and cast-off implements of every sort, was lighted by the effulgence of the tall banquet lamp that Rebecca and Emma Jane had earned as a premium for selling soap. It was the joy and pride of the Simpsons, although as drawing-room furniture it was accompanied only by a battered pine table and three rickety wooden chairs.

The girls admired its glow in passing, but kept on the dark side of the road and went

stealthily by to avoid being hailed by Clara Belle Simpson. Midway up the lane four of them stayed behind a clump of young pines while Rebecca went on alone, staggering under the weight of the precious quilt.

It was cold and the teeth of the "waiters" chattered, but by dint of walking round and round the trees they succeeded in keeping fairly comfortable, as their blood was circulating with incredible rapidity and they were palpitating with excitement.

Soon Rebecca came running lightly down the lane. "Wait till we get into the road," she whispered, "and I'll tell you all, though everything went just right. Now come close and keep walking. I looked through the kitchen window and saw a lamp burning on the table, but nobody there. Then I opened the front door softly and went in on tiptoe, thinking Miss Roxy was upstairs or down cellar, and that I'd put the quilt on a chair with our letter. But the door was open into the kitchen chamber and I could see her

there asleep. She hadn't gone to bed for good, I guess, because she wasn't undressed. She was lying there with her gray shawl and a black jacket over her shoulders, and her father's soldier coat over her feet. Then I had an idea!"

"Of course!" they laughed in chorus.

"So I crept in like a mouse, lifted off the coat and jacket ver-y softly, and spread the quilt over her!"

Here Rebecca's emotion quite overcame her. She stopped still in the road and clasped her hands dramatically, while the girls listened with devouring eagerness.

"Oh!" she said under her breath. "If only you had all been there! The quilt was beautiful beyond compare! Miss Roxy looked like a queen in it, spread all over everything — so big, so thick, so rich and bright! Her face was as white as her hair, and her eyes were shut tight. I tiptoed out, so afraid she'd wake up and have to thank me. But it seemed to me I must go

back once, to see if she had moved, and take one last look; so I crept round to the back and peeped in the window. Just then she put out her hand and I thought she'd feel something strange and open her eyes, but she didn't. She just pulled it up round her neck; then she snuggled down into it the way you do when you know you're going to sleep that instant minute and have a lovely dream. And then the moon came out and shone on her face, so I can't be perfectly certain, though I was looking hard, but I think, I really do think, that she smiled."

Here Rebecca stopped suddenly, turned her head away and swallowed a lump that appeared unexpectedly in her throat.

Emma Jane, who adored her, pressed her arm fondly but uncomprehendingly.

"You are the queerest!" she exclaimed. "I never saw anybody before who cried when she was pleased!"

Rebecca, all smiles again, dashed away the coming tear.

"I've told you before, Emma Jane," she said, "that you'd know lots of things if only you'd read books. 'Cora, the Doctor's Wife' and 'The Pearl of Orr's Island' always cried when they were happy. I feel as if laughs and cries came out of the same spot inside of me!"

Rebecca was right and the moon told the truth. Miss Roxy had smiled, and she had dreamed. Dreams were rare occurrences in her experience, for her nights were as drab and colorless as her days. The dream carried her so far into the past that she was a child again; and the something warm that she felt about her neck was her sister's arm — the sister she loved best of all.

MATT MILLIKEN'S IMPROVEMENTS

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THE teacher of the Riverboro district school sat behind her desk, correcting compositions. The twenty-eight pupils, varying in age from four to fifteen, had departed, and Undine Berry had opened the windows wide in order that the last trace of them should be dispersed. Each separate pupil was a clean, healthy, country girl or boy, but collectively they exhaled an odor of muddy shoes and rubbers, lead and slate pencils, concealed doughnuts or cookies, peppermint lozenges, boxes of angleworms for bait, and other necessary accompaniments to the acquisition of knowledge.

There was room for occasional discouragement on the part of a district school-teacher in a small Maine village. Out of Undine's

twenty-eight there were nine to be taught their "letters." There was a group struggling in arithmetic from fractions to percentage; there were toilers in the labyrinths of grammar, but Undine's task to-day was more than usually exasperating, for the superintendent had put a new plan in operation with a view of obtaining better results in the way of compositions.

"If the children understand fully what they read, Miss Berry, they will be better able to write freely, when the occasion comes. For next week's compositions, Miss Berry, instead of calling upon them for creative work, give them fifteen minutes without previous notice, and ask them to write from memory any verses they have read or recited this term. You will then discover the influence of certain poems upon their imagination and be able to tell how correctly they can recall them for you."

The acid test had been applied that day, and the disheveled results were on the desk

in front of the teacher, whose glance was directed to the few lines contributed by a certain freckle-faced Tommy Mixter, who was perhaps the sharpest and most active thorn in Miss Berry's tender flesh. Tommy's half-hour of agonized effort had produced this brief and inspired result:

Lines to a Frinjed Water Foul
I tear her teetered end side down!
Dear Teacher.
This is all I can remember of it though I liked the peace when Jim Thompson resited it. TOMMY.

Undine Berry had no sense of humor, or this gem would have given her sufficient joy to last through the afternoon; she was only irritated that such dullness could exist in any human being. Had not the stirring lines of "Old Ironsides" been recited on three successive Fridays? Had not Jim Thompson roared, "Aye! tear her tattered ensign down!" with appropriate gestures and been loudly applauded? Had she not explained

what an ensign was, and that "Ay" was pronounced like "I" and "Aye" like "A"?

The teacher glanced out of the window now and then, noting in the distance a little cottage covered with vines and a somewhat-too-stout young man working in a flower garden. Some of the fragrant products of his growing were in a tumbler on her desk at the present moment, having been plucked by his own hand, tied neatly with twine, protected by a portion of the Lewiston *Journal*, and sent by the hand of the aforesaid Tommy, whose outward mien was respectful, but who declared in secret conclave that Matt Milliken was "stuck on teacher."

Undine herself was distinctly aware of this fact, but she was so discreet, so impartial, in her treatment of Riverboro's masculine eligibles — above all, so uncertain of her own attitude in this particular matter — that the coupling of her name with that of Matt Milliken had never been heard, even by the school committee.

"To be Mrs. Matthew Milliken is one thing," thought Undine as she moved her chair out of sight of the young gardener, who was doing more gazing than weeding, "but what would they say at home in Greenford if I married a farmer in a one-horse village? I wonder if he'd be able to keep a hired girl for me. If I had to cook three meals a day and wash dishes the rest of the time, I might as well teach school, though goodness knows that's a dog's life! — I'd like to put these compositions in the stove and set a match to them! Even after they are corrected, I've got to study three pages of geometry to keep ahead of Jim Thompson. The good scholars are a sight more trouble than the stupid ones, after all."

She could bear her work no longer, and opening the desk to fling in the offending papers, she closed it with a bang, shook the dust of toil from her white dress, put on her broad-brimmed hat and white silk gloves,

took a green parasol from the closet, locked the school door behind her thankfully, and strolled away on her homeward walk to Mrs. Wilkins's boarding-house.

She had to pass the Millikens' cottage. There was no other way to go; the most determined gossip would allow that. And everybody knew that Matthew had always worked in the flower garden just before supper-time. She supposed he had other duties, but at all events, between nine and four he was always in his garden, on his front steps, sitting in his open barn door, or washing the top buggy which to her was one of his greatest attractions.

As she drew nearer now, she could see him wipe his forehead, pull down his vest, and brush the dirt from his hands. Then he came toward the gate and leaned over it with a pink cabbage rose in his hand.

"How'll that do to put in your belt?" he asked genially. "Looks to me as if it had growed a-purpose for that partic'ler spot."

There was open, almost violent admiration in his eyes.

"Thank you, Mr. Milliken, it's lovely; and I must thank you, too, for the sweet peas you sent me by Tommy this morning. They look so nice on my desk. I've had rather a hard day."

"I bet you have!" Matt responded fervently. "Land sakes! I'd rather lay bricks for a livin' than ram book-learnin' into that set o' kids. I'd learn 'em with a switch if I was the teacher!"

"Oh! I don't need any switch to keep order," said Undine sweetly. "I'm supposed to be rather good at discipline."

"I bet you be! Some o' the teachers suits the parents, and others suits the children. You 'pear to have 'em both under control. The little ones like to look at you same as they would a picture-book, an' the big boys would lay right down an' let you tread on 'em."

"I'm glad if it seems that way." This

was said with touching modesty. "Of course I couldn't manage those great, strong boys by force."

"You bet you couldn't! We had a husky young college feller teachin' here last year, and the boys fit him the whole time — lockin' him out o' the schoolhouse, hidin' his hat, havin' coughin' spells in study hour, stuffin' the stove pipe with hay, and the land knows what! He's given up teachin' now an' is trainin' for nurse in a lunatic asylum. Says he knows what he's up against and likes the work better."

"I shouldn't care to have anything to do with crazy folks," remarked Undine sententiously.

Matt laughed, showing his handsome teeth. "You may have to, first thing you know, for everybody round here is crazy about you, though they ain't gone to asylums yet!"

Undine could do no less than smile and blush at such a neat compliment. "It's a

real nice place, Riverboro; the people are so pleasant."

"You like it, do you?" asked Matt with obvious eagerness.

Undine cooled suddenly. "Oh, yes! But I'm real quick at making myself at home wherever I am. I have to be, to get any variety out of life. Of course I can't afford to teach in such a small place as this very long."

Matt's face suddenly clouded. "I didn't think of that," he said, taking off his hat. "It is a small place for such as you, and I suppose Greenford is a real gay town — sociables, dances, and all that sort of thing?"

"Yes, Greenford is considered very lively, and there's a great deal of wealth there — the cotton mills, you know. Then I often go to Portland and Brunswick."

Mrs. Milliken suddenly appeared at the screen door. "Good-afternoon, Miss Berry. I'm baking a little something for supper and can't leave my oven. The kitchen's so

hot I won't ask you inside, but if you an' Matthew'll set down under the big ellum, I'll bring you both out a try-cake in a minute."

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Milliken, but I'm afraid I ought to be going. I'll be late to supper, as it is."

"You just set right down," called Mrs. Milliken, "an' I'll show you a one-egg cake that'll deceive you into thinkin' it's made with four, if it's et hot. Then Matt'll walk down as fur as the store with you and bring me back a can of baking-powder."

"He might as well see all there is to see in her, and know all there is to know, which is mighty little, or I miss my guess!" said the old lady to herself as she took a straw out of the broom to try the cake. "Mebbe then he'll get her out of his system; though them pink and white paper-doll girls do have a way of keepin' holt of men-folks."

Ten minutes later Matthew and Undine were walking down the hill while Mrs.

Milliken watched them from behind the parlor curtains.

Undine Berry was a beauty, there was no denying that! Her hair was spun gold, breaking into bewitching little waves and curls round her temples, her ears, and the nape of her neck. Her skin was perfect, her hands and feet small, her figure lovely. A person (female) intent upon finding flaws would have said her features were rather immature and meaningless and that her eyes, though of heaven's own blue in color, were a little cold and calculating, but Matthew Milliken saw no flaws. He thought of her as something so exquisite that he would have liked to put her under a glass case on his parlor melodeon. If only he could get far enough in friendship to fathom her likes and dislikes, her desires, her ambitions, so that he might guess whether there was any chance for a clumsy creature like himself to win her love! But he scarcely knew how to set about such a task. Every time he ad-

vanced, she seemed to retreat a little to fastnesses of thought where he was not at home.

"Some folks don't seem to hold up their heads before the public nor care how their buildings look," Undine commented severely, as they passed a poor little house, forlorn, unpainted, lacking clapboards and shingles.

"Well, a man has got to have a little money saved up, have good health, and work night and day to keep up his farm nowadays," said Matthew. "If my father hadn't left me an awful good piece of land, forty acres of it, with fifteen in woodland, as well as something to go on with till I was big enough to take hold for myself, I don't know how I'd 'a' come out — and my place isn't rightly kep' up, either; I know it. I intend to begin improvin' it this summer. I've got a man comin' to work through hayin' time, I'll get skilled help inside, and you'll see a reg'lar palace when you come

back, Undine — *There!*" — and he checked himself and grew red in the face, as he added: "Your front name slipped out before I thought. I suppose you wouldn't let me call you 'Undine,' would you, Miss Berry?"

"Well, I don't think it would sound quite proper, Mr. Milliken — at any rate, in public. You see, people might talk, and other young men would be asking the same privilege. I always think it makes a girl appear sort of common, corresponding with gentlemen, giving away her photographs, and being called by her first name on a few weeks' acquaintance."

"Would you feel the same about calling me 'Matthew,' if there wasn't anybody 'round?" he stammered.

"To tell the truth, I don't feel as if we'd been friends long enough for me to call you 'Matthew' — yet — Mr. Milliken. I am so unlike other girls. Sometimes I wish I wasn't. I am so reserved, so unsuited to the life I'm living. Mother says she must have

guessed what I was going to be like when she named me Undine."

They were leaning over the bridge-rail now, looking into the foamy rapids of the Saco, as thousands of other young couples had leaned and looked in all the years since the river began to run.

"Most everybody round here is named out of the Bible," said Matthew. "Look at our neighborhood. There's Mark Hobson, Luke Dunn, John Briggs, and me to represent the apostles; there's a Samuel, a Josiah, a David, an Elijah, and a Jeremiah, an' by George! there's a Sarah, a Naomi, an' a Rachel! I looked through the Old Testament last evening to find your name, but I couldn't!"

"Oh, no!" said Undine, in a tone conveying her idea that the Bible was a rather second-class source for names. "I was called Undine out of a fairy story that everybody was reading when mother was a girl. Undine was not a real woman, she was a

water-sprite, and a knight named Lord Huldbrand found her standing in a brook in the forest and fell in love with her. She had been found on the river bank and brought up by a fisherman and his wife. She loved the knight and married him, and after a long time she turned from a water-sprite into a woman, for love had given her a soul!"

Here the narrator's blue eyes tried to convey mysterious things to the bridge-rail, over which they were thoughtfully bent. "It is a beautiful story. I'll lend it to you if you like."

"I ain't much of a reader, but I want that book as quick as I can get it. Can I come over to-morrow? I can't hardly take it in at first hearin', but I want to understand everything you do, and think, and feel, Undine. I want —"

There would have been an offer of marriage on the bridge at that moment, had not Jim Thompson approached swiftly and

hung over the rail beside them in friendly fashion, confident — being young and artless — of a hearty welcome.

Undine was distinctly grateful for the interruption, for she was not in the least ready to say yes or no to the question of all questions, so she bade Matthew good-night with a smile that almost overthrew his reason, and hastened home to supper.

Meantime Matthew, forgetting the baking-powder, hurried back to his mother, went to the pasture for the cows, milked them, set the milk in the dairy, and then stalking into the kitchen where Mrs. Milliken was scalding the pails and pans, called out,

"Say! Where's the dictionary, mother?"

"On the top shelf of the china closet in the dining-room, where it was when your father died. I guess nobody ever has took it down since."

Matthew found the book, brought it back to a chair under the light, and began to turn

the pages. "Gosh!" he ejaculated. "I guess I ain't looked in it sence I left school."

"What word is it you want, Matthew?"

"Water-sprite. Will it be under 'water' or 'sprite,' do you think?"

"Well, you know how to spell and define water fast enough. Why don't you look under '*s*' for sprite?"

"How do you spell it? I can't find it. Mebbe the dictionary's too old."

"It's Webster, Matthew. Webster don't age, at least any to hurt. I suppose it's s-p-r-i-g-h-t, ain't it, like light and sight and might and fight?"

"Don't seem to be here," said Matthew. "What is a water-sprite, mother, anyhow?"

"I don't know, my son, but I should surmise it's a kind of bug that breeds in the water."

"Well, you guess wrong, for Undine Berry's mother named her out of a fairy story, and Undine was a water-sprite and no bug! Here it is, now. It ain't spelled like

'fight,' it is 's-p-r-i-t-e,' and it means a 'spirit.'"

"Why didn't they call it so, then?" asked Mrs. Milliken. "Everybody knows 'spirit' an' nobody ever heard o' 'sprite'!"

"Well, we've learned something new, anyway, mother. I tell you a dictionary is a great book, and I'm going to keep it on the parlor table from now on."

"Not on the marble-top, Matt, for the table is dreadful weak in the legs. You don't seem to get time to do chores in the house this summer. The tall clock don't strike right, the west window in the parlor won't open good, and there's a pane o' glass broken."

"I've been too busy with the garden and my barn work, and I ain't felt so lively as common," apologized Matt, "but I'm goin' to turn over a new leaf and start right in improvin' this place. We've got money in the bank and plenty of timber big enough to sell, with a lot o' young growth comin' on

besides, and there ain't any reason why we shouldn't put on a little mite o' style. I'd like some fresh paint inside and out, new-fashioned wall-paper, and water brought into the kitchen from the well — that much for a start, and more as I get goin' and can see how I can improve."

"I think that's a good plan, Matthew," said his mother, who was knitting quietly in her rocker. "And while the house is all upside down and workmen in it, why couldn't I go and make Lorenzo and Lulu a little visit in Vermont? Could you spare me all right?"

"Sure I could! Maria Snow would come in and clear me up once a week and cook me a batch of victuals, and I could go to Mrs. Wilkins's and get a meal now and then; she's taking transients. I've got Bill Benson comin' Monday to help with milkin' and hayin', you know, but he can board himself. I'll sleep in the shed-chamber while you're gone, so the workmen can have a free hand.

Jiminy, mother, we'll give a jamboree after harvestin'! I declare I'm all het up over the idea of our improvements."

"Well, I only hope they'll turn out to be improvements," his mother answered serenely. "Anyhow you're a young man and likely to live in the house the rest of your life. You'd ought to have it to suit you, Matthew, and make it nice for a wife and children in comin' years."

Matthew blushed to the roots of his hair, and as he took his candle and started for the back stairs, he turned and said, like a shy schoolboy: "I was kind o' thinkin' o' them myself, mother, that's the truth. Though," he added with a laugh, "I don't know exactly who they be, nor what they'll look like."

Mrs. Milliken locked the shed door, turned out the lamp, then lighted her own candle preparatory to going to her little bedroom opening out of the kitchen.

"I guess the man that wrote, 'They also

serve who only stand and wait,' knew something about mothers!" she said to herself.

Matthew, young, strong, big-hearted, simple-minded, was asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow. His waking hours were filled with certain confusions and perplexities, but these vanished in sleep, and his dreams were rose-colored, for he was utterly in love, and with an angel.

Tommy Mixter, aged twelve, at this moment the life and soul of a clump of small boys on the loafers' bench at the Riverboro end of the bridge, knew Undine Berry better than Matthew Milliken did, but Tommy was too young to be smitten by feminine beauty, and he was a keen judge of character. His ears had been snapped by Miss Berry's thumb and finger more than once, and he particularly disliked the way her lips were set when she called him up to ferrule him in the face of the whole school.

"For nothin' at all, neither," he was wont to say. "O' course she ain't got strength

enough to hurt a skeeter, an' her dress is so tight she don't dass put on any steam for fear she'll bust it, but she'd lam you good if she knew how! Matt Milliken will be toein' the mark himself by fall, an' I won't have to lug any more o' his flowers to the next teacher, that's one good thing!"

Undine prepared herself for bed that night with a trifle more care than usual, punctuating each move in the operation by long studies of her charming self in the looking-glass, which was of poor quality and never did her entire justice. Her hair was the first subject of admiration, as she brushed the golden mop and held it up to glow in the full light of her kerosene lamp.

"It might land me 'most anywheres, my hair," she thought, "even in the moving pictures. They say a star can get along without any talent if she has the right kind of hair and wears her clothes well. I never had a chance to try on handsome dresses, but I

guess my shape is as good as any of the stars I've seen. And my face wouldn't need any smoothing out nor touching up, for it's worrying that makes wrinkles, and I never was a worrier. Let other folks do the worrying, is my motto."

Undine, as she looked admiringly at her hair and skin and figure with the aid of a hand mirror, never once discovered that her nose was just the least little bit inclined to be flat. Her lips were red, but the line of her mouth had no lovable, generous curves. Her eyes were so blue that they rivaled sapphires, but they never suffused with tears, nor danced with merry sparkles of fun, nor looked deep, deep into other eyes, revealing all sorts of true, tender, unspeakable things. No, her eyes were a magnificent color and would last her to a good old age, but she would never see visions with them.

Nevertheless there was something in Matthew Milliken's personality that threatened the heretofore dominating influence of

life, as it was lived in moving pictures. His youthful strength and manly presence stirred her heart just a trifle, and also his obvious passion for her had its effect.

There had been a moment that afternoon when she, who was ordinarily so self-centered, could not help noticing how the dog nestled his nose softly into Matt's hand; how the cat kept creeping round his legs, hunching its back and rubbing its ears till it got the stroke under the chin that it was wishing for; how the Jerseys came up to the bars to greet him. She had once seen him at milking time and noted how still the cows stood in the stalls, giving their milk tranquilly at the touch of his steady, kind hands. Yes, he would be good to live with, but he didn't dress well and looked worse on Sundays than he did in his working clothes. She liked the things he said, and the way he looked at her and complimented her, but there were sad lapses in his grammar. And how would he appear in company, if she

succeeded in dragging him away from this one-horse village and establishing him where her beauty would have a larger audience?

She didn't know; she could not be sure. Why was it that a really "stylish" man from a large city never came across her path? If one ever did arrive, she felt sure that her heart, which had never in its life beat faster than normal, might carry her to a swift, sure decision. Meantime she was twenty and would soon be "walking down the western slopes of life," Mrs. Wilkins's metaphor for unmarried ladies over five and twenty.

"Sometimes I fear I shan't be able to stave Matt off till the end of the term," thought Undine. "That's what I'd rather do, for I'm certain to spend part of my vacation in Portland, where I always meet good society, and one can never tell what will happen. I don't want to see too much of him for fear I'll get to liking him and won't be able to settle matters for my best good. I wonder if his mother supposes I don't see through

her and her 'try-cakes'? She hates me like poison, that woman does, because she knows I wouldn't fetch and carry for Matt the way she does!"

These reflections concluded, Undine went to bed and slept peacefully.

June was a trying month that year. The weather was unusually warm, and an outbreak of measles among the children interfered with Undine's preparations for the last day of school. She had several drives and moonlight walks with Matthew Milliken, and she had nearly succeeded in keeping him within bounds.

As she had perfect command of herself, and as he was simply dumb with love — shy, too, and full of fears at putting his fate to the touch too soon — he had not been able to speak his heart out and ask her "punctilió" — a favorite word of his mother's — if she would marry him in the autumn. He had awakened every morning deter-

mined to do it, and he had gone to bed every night without having succeeded. He assured himself that he had made some little headway on certain occasions that he recalled with burning cheeks in the solitude of his own room. He had held her hand for several minutes once when they were sitting under the pines on the river bank, but his enjoyment had been sadly incomplete, because he had been terror-stricken every second for fear she would take it away. He had been obliged to make the move himself finally because of the arrival of a large picnic party, the members of which he still regarded with fierce animosity.

Then — oh, never-to-be-forgotten moment of supreme bliss! — with a courage born of despair he had kissed her on Mrs. Wilkins's steps after Wednesday evening prayer-meeting. If she had not returned the caress as fully as he could have wished, at least she had not withdrawn herself in anger. It was at that moment that, made

more daring by the remembrance that she was leaving the village for her vacation, he pleaded:

"Undine, haven't I waited long enough for an answer? I can't expect you to love me as I love you, but just give me a word to live on till you come back!"

"I don't hardly know what to say," she murmured, reaching up to see if she had lost her pearl earring. "I like you better than anybody I've ever seen, but I wish you'd let me think it over these next two months. I'm not sure I'm fitted to be a farmer's wife. I've never done any housework, you know, Matthew."

Oh! how fragile, how plaintive, how in need of all a man's strength she looked in the moonlight!

"Why, Undine, do you s'pose I'd let you spoil your pretty hands with rough work? I'll always be there to stand between you and the hard parts, and you shall have a hired girl to wait on you every minute of

the day. Besides, you don't know the improvements I'm going to make in my premises. The house is going to beat anything there is in Riverboro or Edgewood. While I'm gettin' ready for you, Undine, won't you be gettin' ready for me?"

"You domineering man, you!" she whispered, playing with the lapels of his coat, "teasing me into saying 'yes' against my will! I suppose you must go ahead with your improvements and let me see them when I come back. I am sure it'll be all right!"

"Seal your promise with a kiss?" Matthew whispered, and it is difficult to see how Undine could have evaded the direct issue, even had she wished, had not Mrs. Wilkins, opening a window, called out,

"The door-key is under the rug, Undine."

Whereupon Matthew, who was concealed by the thick foliage of the maples, opened the gate softly and sped homeward on the

wings of love. She had said to go ahead, that it would be all right. That settled it.

He had looked forward to another and a fonder parting when he should take Undine to the station on Friday, but on Thursday, when he went rapturously to Biddeford to engage paperers, painters, and plumbers, the school committee voted to give up the closing exercises on account of illness in the school, and Undine promptly took the train for Greenford, leaving a note for Matthew to the effect that she had been called home suddenly, as her stepfather wanted her to go to Albany with him on a business trip.

This was in the nature of a blow, but only a slight one, after all, a disappointment that in no wise affected their relations or their tacit compact with each other; so Matthew plunged into a series of fourteen-hour days of work on his improvements. No man, no three men, could keep up with him. He was omnipresent and untiring, and the labor progressed so rapidly that the village

could not restrain its curiosity, all the gentlemen of leisure passing their time in the vicinity of the Milliken house, ready to furnish suggestions or to act as brakes upon inadvisable changes.

Meantime no letters passed between the lovers save one note from Undine written in high spirits on the train to Albany. Matt had intended to go to Greenford every second Sunday during the summer, to report progress and keep the slightly unsteady flame of her affection from going out. The Albany visit put a stop to that, of course, and he felt a little helpless as the weeks ran by. He had not the pen of a ready writer, and Undine had once said playfully that she was a bad correspondent and didn't intend to touch either pen or pencil in vacation. Finally Matt spent two hours of strenuous work with the dictionary and wrote to his beloved in Greenford with directions to forward the missive if she were not there. It was a letter that would have melted a

heart of stone, though viewed as a composition she would have marked it C4.

Then he plunged into the improvements again. His mother wrote approval of the samples of wall-paper he had sent her, and thanked him for selecting the little gray trellis pattern with pink roses on it for her own bedroom, advising him not to work too hard, for Maria Snow had written he was looking pale.

"I hope he'll look paler still," thought the crafty old lady, "for that'll mean he can't get that water-sprite to marry him, and he'll take sick and want me to come home to nurse him!"

He showed no signs of "taking sick" however, and it seemed, in his frenzy for improvements, that the Evil One had selected him as a victim. The color of the new paint on the house did not please a single inhabitant of the village, and what was even more regrettable, it did not suit Matthew himself. It was far too green, and

the bright yellow blinds suggested by the artist who was doing the work, were felt by all to be a public insult. The fence, too, had to be of the same colors, either separate or mixed, as there was plenty of paint for the purpose, and the scenery in the vicinity, on a bright day in late August, sank into insignificance as compared with the Milliken premises when finished. The misguided youth had screened in the little piazza with wire netting and put a high-power electric bulb in the ceiling.

"He ain't intendin' to do no courtin' there, that's one thing certain," said Maria Snow. "I guess he's goin' to read the Portland papers out loud to Undine summer evenin's. He's planned light enough to see the small print in the telephone directory."

He took out the beautiful Colonial front door with the fanlight over it, always greatly admired by summer visitors, and installed one of stained pine with a large square of glass in it adorned with inside curtains of

Nottingham lace tied back with yellow ribbons. That was Maria Snow's idea.

"It looks dressy," she said, "and if you're goin' to keep up with the procession, you've got to *keep* up, that's all; though I do think, Matthew, you might have left your grandfather's stone steps, if only for the sake of the old toad that's lived under 'em for fifty years to my certain knowledge."

The stone steps were worn and chipped, however, and had settled down on one side, while the path to the front door was not the kind suitable for high-heeled slippered feet, so steps and walk were changed to cement, smooth, dry, and hideously inappropriate to the little farmhouse.

"There's folks say you're goin' to be married, Matt, with all these improvements," said Bill one day.

"Well, mebbe I be," Matt said laconically, "and mebbe mother and me are goin' to take boarders. The neighbors can take their choice."

Then came a day when the workmen picked up their tools and left, and Maria Snow swept and scrubbed and cleaned up after them, and Matt went out in the barn and filled his pipe and tilted his chair back and took an hour to think for the first time in two months. For days he had tried the new kitchen pump every few hours, for Bill had declared it would never work right, since the well was ten feet lower than the sink, and it stood to reason that water wouldn't run uphill. This exercise was varied by the experimental turning on and off of sixteen electric lights in barn and house, including the parlor chandelier, which always had a hypnotic effect on him when he sat on the haircloth sofa and gazed fixedly at it for some moments.

"I kind o' miss mother's lamp with the glass danglers and the piece o' red flannin' in the kerosene," he thought, "but Undine'll light up something splendid in this room, so't everybody'll see how han'some she is!"

And then he would go out to the barn again, for there was really nothing to do but wait. On the second of September he could stand the strain no longer. He must see her even if he had to go to Albany, where he had never been invited, and which seemed to him the Antipodes. Matt was simple, there's no denying it. He trusted anybody he loved. She had said go ahead with the improvements and it would be all right. She had let him kiss her and hold her hand. He was so incorrigibly high-minded and so unversed in worldly wisdom that these facts simply clinched any arguments that seemed to point in another direction. The Committee expected her to open the school on the next Monday, and this was a Thursday. He knew he could not telephone to Greenford without its being noised about in both villages, so he took his horse and drove to Wareham to pay some bills, make some purchases, and telephone from a drug store where he wasn't known. He got the post-

master at Greenford, who said the Berrys had returned the night before, bringing company with them, but they didn't answer the telephone, and he thought they must be gone off somewhere in their new motor.

This news put Matthew in a panic. Undine would be bringing her people over to Riverboro to see him, and he was away from home. He was a merciful driver, but the horse had to make eleven miles in forty minutes. Nearing his house, which was visible a long distance away, he saw no sign of activity, no motor in evidence. The barn was closed; Bill was not sitting on the piazza as usual. He remembered then that he had sent Bill home for a few days. He drove up to the hitching post, tied the horse, and went up the cement walk so as to get used to it. As he neared the steps, he saw an envelope stuck under the new stained door. There had never been one there before in all his twenty-three years of life, never!

He knew it had been put there by Undine, and he knew what was in it. His was not an alert mind, and up to this moment he had not harbored a single suspicion of the girl's treachery. He looked long and hard at the envelope; then he unhitched the horse, watered and fed him, put him in the stall, and closed the barn. He went into the house through the piazza and the side entrance, turning the key in the lock behind him, took off his hat, traveled through the kitchen and sitting-room to the front hall, drew the letter from under the front door, pulled down the green shades in the front windows, and sat down to read his doom. He didn't need to be told what was in the letter. He merely wanted to know how Undine put the case; how she apologized for breaking a man's heart, hurting his pride, and crushing his spirit. He tore open the envelope, and this was what he read:

At the Schoolhouse, Riverboro
Sept. 2nd, 19—

Dear Mr. Milliken:

I came back to tell the School Committee that I am not going to teach for them any more. I am sorry you happened to be away in Wareham, for after the superintendent, I wanted you to be the first to know that I am engaged to be married to Mr. Arthur Henderson, a bank clerk in Albany, whom father and I met while staying at the Dupont Hotel there. I didn't write you about it before because talking is so much more satisfactory, and I kind of hated to write anyway, for fear you would blame me for holding out hopes I could not satisfy. I really tried to like you well enough to marry you and live in Riverboro ["Like!" groaned poor Matt], but a country place is not to my taste, and somehow I could not make up my mind, perhaps because I was never taken off my feet till I met with Mr. Henderson. It was love at first sight on both sides in the hotel dining-room.

I hope you did not consider I had really promised anything, for you must have seen I was never crazy about you the way a girl ought to be when she is meaning to settle down and marry a man. Please do not hold

any hard thoughts, for I am not the one for you, nor you the one for me. True love has developed me a great deal and I see things more clearly than I did last summer.

I asked Bill — don't know his other name — to take me over the house, as I thought you would wish me to see the improvements. It is not quite so quaint and home-like as it used to be, but much more convenient. Screening the piazza is a great help in keeping out mosquitoes, but yours is a trifle small, and Bill thinks the wire netting makes it look like a hen-coop. Perhaps it does, but I believe you'll get a great deal of comfort from it.

I am kind of sorry you bricked up the sitting-room fireplace and put in a Franklin stove, for the open fire used to look so cozy last April, do you remember? The wall-papers are very handsome, and how your mother will enjoy the new stove and the pump in the kitchen sink! As for the electric lights, I can fancy how any one will appreciate them who has filled lamps and cleaned chimneys all her life.

I am mentioning every little thing to show you how carefully I looked about, for I want you to feel my interest in it all, even though I am not going to live there, as we thought

possibly at one time I might. I have told Arthur that you were the best friend I had in Riverboro, and I should have become homesick and bored to death if it had not been for your kind little attentions. I have said no more about you to him, as, like all true lovers, he is inclined to be just a little jealous! With remembrances to your mother, and with the compliments of the season, I am your sincere friend and well-wisher,

UNDINE BERRY.

P.S. If you should ever pass through Albany, we would like to have you drop in at the Dupont Hotel, where Arthur has taken a suite. The wedding is to-morrow morning in Greenford, and we leave Maine the same afternoon.

U. B.

Matthew tore the letter in bits and, putting it in the kitchen stove, set fire to the fragments. Then he drew down all the shades so that passers-by in the morning would think he had gone away for the day. He did not go upstairs as usual, but went into his mother's room, impelled by some blind, unconscious instinct of needing sym-

pathy. He opened her closet door and put his hand gently on the faded gingham dresses and wrappers she had left behind her. Then, turning down her neat white counter-pane as he had seen her do a hundred times, he flung himself, still dressed, on her bed and, turning to her pillow for comfort, said with a choking voice and a deep-drawn breath,

"Thank God, there's always mothers to fall back on!"

It was such a little room, with one window and all his mother's humble but precious keepsakes on the bureau and dresser, that it soothed him, as he lay there alone until he had struggled with his first sorrow and overcome it. After all, he was but a boy of twenty-three, and he took trouble hard, like a child.

Yes, naturally the affair was a seven days' wonder in Riverboro, but nobody ever knew the rights of it. They thought Matt had been a trifle reckless about his improvements, but then he was of marriageable age

and could afford them, though he seemed to be terribly gloomy about them now they were all finished.

They also thought he might be a little mite huffy about Undine Berry's taking up with an Albany man after "going" with him all summer, but that was nothing but guesswork and soon passed out of mind.

The side of the affair that Matthew turned toward his mother can best be told by his own letter to her, which was the longest one he had ever written in his life. He posted it on Saturday night at Wareham, but started for Vermont twenty-four hours later to bring her home.

"You keep house for me, Maria," he said with a forlorn attempt at gayety. "Mind you keep the improvements swept and dusted, and if the motor folks get too fresh, write a sign and hang it on the gate. Make it read: 'We intended this house to be green. If it looks too bright to suit you, drive by fast!'"

Riverboro, Sept. 10th, 19—

To Mrs. Cyrus Milliken,
Warsaw, Vermont

Dear Mother:

I guess you suspicioned how it was with Undine and me when you offered to go and spend the summer with Lorenzo and his wife in Vermont, and I didn't say nothing to keep you home. It wa'n't that I didn't like to have you round, for I always did, and you know it, but the way I figured it out was, I was going to make so many improvements on the premises that you wouldn't hardly have a rest for the sole of your foot and you would be all fussed up till I got everything to rights.

Well, now, mother, I've got to tell you, nothing has turned out the same as I thought it would. Undine gave me to understand that she liked me first rate, and she knew well enough that I was fascinated with her from the minute I set eyes on her. I could see she thought the house and barn was kind of run down and common-looking, and I figured it out that if I made improvements enough in the premises and got everything fixed up fashionable, she'd marry me when the fall term of school was over. She was young and handsome and had more educa-

tion than me, and she not being used to housework, I figured it out that I'd make things as easy and pleasant for her as I could, and try to keep up with the band more than you or I was used to.

Well, mother, I was fooled all round, and I guess I ain't the first man, neither. My improvements wouldn't 'a' had any weight with her, though I'd sweated all summer over 'em, even working 4th of July and right through dog-days without hardly sitting down to a square meal or stopping to change my shirt. She'd made up her mind to ship me even before she seen the cement walk and the electric lights and the lace curtain in the front door, which has attracted more attention than a circus ever sence it was put in.

When we said good-bye, she told me to go ahead and it would be all right. I took it as a sacred promise, and oh, mother, it mortifies me to confess how clean gone I was on that girl! The way it turned out was this: I got so upset and worried by not hearing from her by the last of August that I couldn't stand it any longer. If she'd stayed to home in Greenford, I could have drove over every week or two and kept her up to her word, or else, though I was blind as a bat, I might

have seen through her; but when I wrote you all the news in July you remember I said, "Undine Berry has gone on a visit to Albany with her father." Well, she stayed in Albany, and she didn't correspond with me but one note and one post-card which I answered to general delivery, having no address. I didn't write her all the grand things I was doing, because her being a school-teacher, I figured it out that she'd catch me up on some mistake in spelling and turn me down cold. Well, mother, she done that anyway all right!

I had gone to Wareham to pay bills and telephone to Greenford where nobody could hear me asking questions about Undine. The school committee was expecting her every train, but she hadn't written to them for weeks. Well, mother, I was gone four hours, and when I come home my heart sunk right down, for the house looked strange to me. I knew something had happened to the premises and to me, and sure enough it was so. I hitched the horse and went up the cement walk, because Undine said once a gentleman should use the front door, and I've done it all summer for practice. I always felt like a fool when I went in that way, and now I've locked it on the inside.

Well, I hadn't taken three steps before I saw a letter poked under the door, and I knew it was all up between me and Undine. I hadn't been looking for it either; it just come to me in a flash. I burned up the letter, but sometime I'll tell you what was in it, though no other living soul shall ever hear it, but my heart kind of curled right up inside of me and ached like it was a tooth.

She didn't give me the mitten in a ladylike way. She wrote a mean, cruel letter, mother; the kind that helped me some, after the first blow. She's married to an Albany bank clerk, and they are living in something she calls a "suite," at a hotel where a lady never has to go into the kitchen. She even had the gall to get Bill Benson to show her all over the house, and by Jiminy, she didn't like the improvements any better than she did me! I wish I hadn't burned the letter now, for I kind o' think I could have laughed over it — in a couple o' years.

This is an awful long letter, but I'm giving up all day Sunday to it and probably shall never write another. I want you to know everything, and I guess I couldn't never tell it by word of mouth, I'd be so ashamed.

I ain't going to pretend I ain't downcasted, for I be! I'd fixed my mind on being snowed in with Undine all winter and setting in front of the new Franklin stove with our feet up on the fender and the electric lights turned on everywheres, for it don't cost no more to burn ten than one, as you pay by the year. I had sold all the cows but one, thinking Undine wouldn't want me to stay in the barn too much; parted with the hog, too, for Undine said they always smell. Perhaps the hog does, but the ham don't, and I'll buy another if you think best.

I think I'd ought to say that mebbe you won't take kindly to some of the improvements yourself, and I don't want to have 'em break on you sudden, which accounts for this letter. You'll like having water brought indoors, and a pump in the kitchen sink, for it will save you lots of steps. You'll be glad of the electrics, because you won't have to fill lamps and clean chimblies every morning. But the color of the house needs getting used to. I wanted it gay and bright for Undine, and by Jiminy, I got it!

You see, I bought the paint wholesale, and when one side of the house was done, folks could see it from Wareham, and I wanted to keep it a house and not turn it

into a landmark, so I tried to tone it down. Well, mother, I bought thirty-seven dollars' worth of stuff to tone that paint down, and there warn't no tone-down to it, so as I'd spent so much on it, I figured it out that I'd better give up and let time fade it out. After all, women-folks live more inside of a house than outside, and you're always busy in the back part and don't hear the motors stop when they pass by, and the people in them make remarks.

I cut down one of the ellums by the gate just after you left. I don't know whether you'll miss it, but it blocked the view of the schoolhouse and I couldn't see Undine moving about or working at the blackboard. I wish I had it back, for I don't want no closer view of the teacher they've hired now than I can get from a good ways off.

I've put the dictionary away on the upper shelf of the china closet where father left it. I won't say I've given up all idea of marrying sometime or other, but the girl's got to have a Bible name next time. No more water-sprites for Matt Milliken!

Now, mother, without you like Vermont better'n you do Maine, and Lorenzo and Lulu better'n you do me, take the next train for home. When I get round to it, I shall

know you're worth more'n a dozen Undines, though I won't deny I feel awful blue, and never expected to be turned down cold like I have been by Undine Berry, but I was misled by her looks, and that's the gospel truth. I ain't afraid you'll turn me down, mother, without Lorenzo and Lulu want you to winter with 'em awful bad, but I hope they won't, for the neighbors are bound to talk, and I need you more'n I like to write in a letter. It looks kind of foolish, set down in plain black and white.

You can have all the improvements I made, and welcome; and I guess the greatest improvement of the whole caboodle will be the improvement my mother will be on Undine Berry!

Your affec. son
MATTHEW MILLIKEN

THE END